



♪ 杉井 光

さよならピアノソナタ

イラスト ♪ 植田 亮

"I will disappear when June comes" — that's what Mafuyu said.

One month before she disappeared,

we refused to give in to each other, and kept clashing heads.

We had our fair share of quarrels; we occasionally helped one another,
and I had seen her cry,

but despite all that, I was still by her side the whole time—





さよならピアノソナタ

♪杉井 光 イラスト♪植田 亮

蛭沢

Mafuyu
Ebisawa

真冬

We met each other during
the spring break before the start of high school.

The piano girl prodigy
who disappeared from the music scene two years ago.


For some unknown reason
she avoided human contact
and holed herself up in an empty classroom,
practicing on those extremely difficult
electric guitar techniques-
.....wait, what about the piano?

Her real personality,
which cannot be seen through CD covers or television-
was actually a girl who is hopelessly selfish, foul mouthed,
violent, and thornful but at the same time gets scared easily,
and is a cry baby.

Though she is quite special.....
she is about the same as any other ordinary girl out there.

"If we
don't
find it,
will you
listen to
anything
I say?"





*"We still have
to do our best
even if life is boring.
I'll root for you,
just a little."*

*I was stunned when I saw
the class allocation for high school.*

*From elementary school
to middle school,
my childhood friend has been my classmate
for nine whole years,
and now we are in the same class yet again.*

*Perhaps this is some sort of prank
by some god out there
because he thought it'd be interesting
for our unsavory ties to continue.*

*She's unreserved when speaking to me,
and because of that,
our classmates mistakenly view us
as a 'married couple(?)'.*

*On top of that,
she has started dragging me along
to join some questionable club activity as well.*

相原
Chiaki
Aihara
千晶

神楽坂 響子

Kyouko
Kagurazaka

*"So young man,
you shall work
till you drop
for the sake of
my romance and revolution."*

As for the questionable club activity,
this senior is the chief of the
Folk Music Research Club.

A self-proclaimed revolutionist,
she is a wild and unruly guitarist.

She seems capricious,
and is really manipulative

- I am always getting tricked by her.

Since she always goes all out
for those pointless things,
she can be really hard to deal with.

I heard she wants
to create a band that
consists of only cute girls,
so why is she interested in me?

As for me, I am just the indoor-type who only knows how to repair machines. I grew up in a musical environment due to my father's job.

Despite enjoying listening to music, it is really troublesome when senpai comes inviting me to join the band! It's not like I am that good at playing musical instruments.

I'd secretly sneak into a derelict classroom after school, and my original plan would be to listen to my favorite music as I please, and live out my high-school life leisurely, that was it. That is until I met Mafuyu again in May.

桧
川
ナ
オ

Nao
Hikawa



Even if I lose things that
are important to me,
after escaping from everything,
I am still not alone.
And because I am not alone,
I have the strength to walk
to the ends of the world—
That's how I feel.

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Chapter 1

The Department Store at the Ends of the World



*Then.....
Is that fun?*



1



With the windows of the train pushed up by just about five centimeters, the smell of the sea was already drifting in slowly.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and there were no other passengers aboard other than me. There will be a lot of visitors heading down to the beach once it hits the summer holidays. But for now, which was early April, there was still quite some time to go before the beaches were available. Therefore, middle school students might be the only ones who would be taking a trip to the beach during spring break..... which included me.

The double-carriage train rumbled past a gentle turn. The walls of mountains and bamboo forests suddenly disappeared before my eyes, and my line of vision broadened, along with the increasing smell of the sea. The clusters of rooftops and the copper-rust colored sea were darkened under the gloomy sky.

The train wobbled and stopped at a small station.

I grabbed my backpack from the luggage rack. As I walked onto the open platform, I could immediately see a grey band between the dark green mountains on my right.

I have no idea when it all started, but the valley has turned into a huge dumping ground. I don't know if the dumping ground is legal or not but, there are plenty of trucks from all over the place that come here to dispose broken electric appliances or furniture. As time goes by, that place became strangely silent. It was so quiet, it felt as though it was fifteen minutes after the apocalypse of the world - an enclosed space was thus formed. The middle school which I studied at is located close to the beach, and ever since I stumbled here by accident after being lost one day, I have secretly named this place <The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>. That name appears in a certain novel, and even though it is long and mouthy, it doesn't matter since I don't





plan to tell anyone about it.

My father has a weird occupation as a music critic (though that is really rude towards other critics, but I just want to emphasize how uncommon my father's job is to me), and due to that my house is filled with all sorts of sound systems, records, CDs, musical scores and other related items. My mother left the house about ten years ago as she couldn't take any of it much longer. As for me, though I had no plans or inspirations back then, I swore to myself the night when I became six, that I will never be a music critic.

Let's put all that aside for the moment. The equipment in our house are tools of the trade, and yet my father handles them carelessly. He breaks everything - be it the speakers, the turntable or the DVD player. Since there weren't many people who bought toys for me when I was young, I resorted to dismantling the broken equipment, and slowly learned how to repair and assemble them. As of now, it's sort of like a half-hobby to me.

Due to the needs of my hobby, I visit this <Department Store of Hearts' Desires> next to the beach once every two to three months by making my way down via the wobbling train to collect some useful parts. It feels like I am the only living person left in this world when I walk around the rubbish heap by myself, and that feeling itself is rather pleasant.

However, I was not the only person to visit the dumping ground that day.

As I walked through the forest and made my way towards the valley, I saw a mountain made up of abandoned fridges and scrapped cars that were exposed to rain





and shine. Surprisingly, I also heard the sound of a piano.

I originally thought I was hearing things, but as I stepped out of the forest and took a look at the heap of rubbish right before my eyes, I realized I wasn't just hearing the sound of a piano. The low chords of the bassoon were like the surface of the calm seas..... and the sounds of the clarinet came to me soon after.

I had no idea what the song was, but I have heard of it before. It's probably a piano concerto from nineteenth century France. But why could I hear it here?

I climbed up the roof of a derelict car, and began scaling up the rubbish heap. The melody of the piano turned into that of a march. I originally thought the sound of the piano came from a radio which still had some power left in it, but that thought vanished within seconds. The depth of the sound was not the same, it was definitely the sound of a piano played live.

I looked at the basin after I reached the peak of the heaps, and the sight which greeted me was so shocking it made me hold my breath.

A large grand piano was buried amid the cupboards and broken beds. Its lid was giving off a black glow, as though it was doused with water, and it expanded outwards like the wings of a bird. On the other side of the piano, was a bunch of maroon hair that swayed along with the exquisite sounds of the instrument.

It's a girl.

That girl was sitting in front of the slanted keyboard, with her gaze fixed on her hands, and her long eyelashes slightly drawn back. Those penetrating and exquisite sounds played by her were like the raindrops of late winter, bouncing out drop by drop from within the piano.







I somehow recognized her face.

Her stern and pale white face was something that was out of this world, and she was so beautiful that I could not shift my sight away from her; the maroon hair of hers shimmered like molten amber under the sun.

I've seen her somewhere before, but..... why is that?

I couldn't remember her name. As for the piece she was playing, I couldn't recall it either.

There should be no one else around here either, so I should only be hearing the sounds from the piano as well as the gushes of waves that were filtered through the forest, so why? Why could I hear the sound of an orchestra?

I suddenly noticed that the piano beneath me was giving off a tremble and a slight sound whenever she played the low notes with force. Not just that, the bicycle that was buried within the rubble over there, the rusted metal container, the broken LCD screens, everything - they were all resonating along with the piano.

The rubbish buried in the valley was singing.

But those echoes stirred my memories of the orchestra that accompanied this tune.

It's just my auditory hallucination, but it felt way too real.

I do know that piece of music somehow, but what exactly was it?

Why— did it touch my heart so much?

The allegro march was like a flurry of footsteps that flowed into the expansive





estuary before dawn, which was the music at adagio. Countless tiny bubbles of notes flowed upwards from the depths of the sea onto the surface, and gradually spread outwards. Then, the sounds of the orchestra rang from afar again, and this time it should continue on steadily—

But the music suddenly stopped.

I held my breath, and looked downwards at the piano, while being stuck to the peak of the rubbish heap like a barnacle.

The girl stopped playing the piano, and was looking at me with an extremely stern look.

The hallucinated orchestra, the reverberation of the piano and even the sounds of the winds rustling through the trees - it had all disappeared, leading me to think for an instant that the apocalypse had really come.

"..... How long have you been standing there?"

She spoke. Her voice was clear like the shattering of a wine glass on the floor. She was angry. I lost my footing, and slipped from the fridge that I was standing on.

"I am asking you, how long have you been standing there?"

"Urm, well....."

I was finally able to breathe after squeezing my voice out.

"..... Probably during the cadenza."

"The cadenza at the beginning?"





She sprang upwards, and her soft maroon hair fell down from her shoulders. It was only then when I realized she was wearing a white one piece dress.

"So you've been listening since the beginning?"

I couldn't help it, alright! What did you want me to do then? Do an Indian dance while yelling my lungs off for you to see? As I looked at her red face and her fluttering hair, I slowly regained my composure. I did nothing wrong, it was just that someone had arrived earlier than I did, right?

"Sicko! Pervert!"

"No, hold on!" Why must I be charged under those accusations?

"To think you actually stalked me all the way out here!"

"Stalk..... Oi! I am just here to collect some junk!"

The instant she slammed the key lid of the piano, there was something that resonated along with it. Then, the fridge that I was standing on gave a violent tremble. It tilted slightly, and I slid down along with it.

"Whoaaaaa!"

I rolled away from the tilted fridge and the hood of the derelict car, towards the bottom of the basin where the piano was. My shoulders crashed into the leg of the piano.

"..... Ouch!"





Just as I was about to stand up, I realized that her face was right before mine, and her navy blue eyes were gazing at me intently. I was shocked, and was unable to move. I could only stare at those lips of hers, which were gently quivering like the petals of camellia:

"Why are you here if you are not stalking me?"

"Eh? Ah, no, you see....."

She knitted her brows. The mysterious magical powers that were binding me seemed to have weakened a little. I finally managed to regain control of myself, and scooted backwards while still sitting on the ground.

"I said I am here to pick up some audio parts! I do come here occasionally. It's not like I am stalking you."

"..... Really?"

Why would I lie? Then again, did this girl know that she may be stalked by someone?

"In any case, leave here immediately, and tell no one about my presence here. You are to remove the memories of the tune you had just heard from your mind as well."

"How is that possible....."

"You definitely. Cannot. Tell!" Her eyes were shimmering with tears, as though the stars were falling from the sky. Having witnessed that, I could no longer say anything else.

"I understand, I'll just scam, alright?"





I heaved my backpack onto my shoulders, and began climbing up the rubbish heap. Then cranking sounds of a machine suddenly came from behind me, and what followed were her screams of "Ah! Ya!".

As I turned my head to take a look, I noticed a palm-sized tape recorder on the piano, and it was giving off a strange sound. Could it be that she was actually recording this entire time.....? The tape inside seemed to be spinning back and forth. I couldn't bear seeing that worried look on her face as she grabbed onto the tape recorder any longer. I walked over and pressed the switch of the recorder.

"..... Is..... Is it broken?"

She asked with a voice that was close to tears, as she carefully lifted up the tape recorder and cupped it like an egg that was close to hatching.

"Ah, don't do that. You can't just pry open the recorder like that."

She hurriedly stopped herself from attempting to open the cover. I placed my backpack onto the piano, and took out a screwdriver. Her eyes widened as she saw that.

"..... Are you dismantling it?"

"No worries, I'll repair it carefully."

As I took the recorder from her hands, I realized that it was no ordinary recorder, but a double-track recorder and player. Not only can it play the A and B sides of the tape simultaneously, it can record on them separately as well. However, the labels on the recorder were printed with a language that I have never seen before, and it was obviously not English.





"What language is this?"

"Hungarian," she replied softly. European goods huh. Can I repair this?

As I unscrewed the screws and removed the outer casing, what appeared before me was an interior made with parts that I was familiar with. International standards are really useful.

"Can it..... be repaired?"

"Probably."

I lowered the lid of the piano to use it as a worktable, and slowly began to disassemble the recorder. Just as I thought, the magnetic tape was pulled out of its cassette. It was spewed out and clustered into a bunch, just like how sea cucumbers spew out their organs, so it took me quite some effort to remove the cassette.

"..... Hey, is this tape recorder defective to begin with?"

"Eh? Ah, mmm..... the tape will not stop spinning even if it reaches the end, so it will get even more entangled if you don't press the stop button."

I see, the automatic stopping device was already faulty.

"I-It's because of your sudden appearance, that caused me to forget to press it."

So it's my fault again? Just buy a new one already.

"Is this important to you?" Since she was still using it despite it being faulty.





"Eh?" She looked at me in surprise, then lowered her head and said, "Mmm."

Hungary huh. This girl should not be Japanese then, or is she? From the contours of her face, she looked like a mixed-blood to me. As I thought of that, I dug for parts from the rubbish heap, and finally completed the surgery of the recorder after finding the required parts. The tape recorder will no longer go out of control, whether it is rewinding the tape, or fast-forwarding.

"And it's done."

"Eh..... Ah, mmm." Her face showed an expression of disbelief. I was about to press the play button to confirm if the recorder was working normally, but she suddenly snatched the recorder away from me.

"Y-You are not allowed to listen." She tweaked the volume to its smallest, then pressed the play button to confirm if it was working properly.

"..... T-Thanks."

She hugged the tape recorder tightly, and thanked me with a tiny voice while hanging her head downwards, with her face flushed red. For some unknown reason, I felt embarrassed as well, so I turned away and nodded.

Just as I was done with packing up my tools back into my backpack, she suddenly asked, "Why are you bringing so many things along with you?"

"I just said I enjoy fiddling with machines, that's why I am here to look for parts!"

"Then..... is that fun?"

Her sudden question caused me to be unsure on how to answer her.





"Hmm..... I am not too sure if repairing a broken machine is something to be happy about. However, everyone seems really happy when they can regain what they thought they had lost."

As we exchanged our glances, her face became red again, so she hurriedly turned her face away. As I stared at her side profile, there was a sudden impulse to bombard her with multiple questions. Why are you here? Or rather..... who are you? What was the title of the piece that you were playing? And also, I wanted to listen to what she had recorded, you know? Perhaps that orchestra which I had heard wasn't actually my hallucination? I thought of all those things, but she would probably get angry again if I was to actually ask her those questions.

She placed the recorder back onto the piano, then sat on a cupboard as a substitute for a chair and looked at her feet. I wanted to continue talking with her, but the atmosphere was no longer right, and I could not find an opportunity to speak. Forget it, it felt like she was finding me troublesome anyway. I'll just head home for the day.

I probably won't be meeting her again the next time I come here, right? Or perhaps she came here because there is no piano in her house? I thought of all those things while preparing myself to climb up the rubbish heap. Just then, her voice came from behind me,

"Urm—"

I turned my head.

She was fidgeting next to the piano. She didn't look angry this time round, but rather, she was blushing due to embarrassment. "Do you live nearby?"

I tilted my head.





"..... Nope. Takes about four hours to get here by train."

"Then are you heading to the station now?"

She instantly showed an expression of relief the moment I nodded my head. She slung the recorder next to her waist, and began to scale the slope created by the huge rubbish by following behind me.

"Are you going back? Then I can just stay here, right?"

"You can't! Just move, go on!"

What's with that.....

I maneuvered past the bumpy heaps of rubbish unhappily, and slowly walked back towards the forest next to the valley. She kept complaining about how her feet hurt and how she was about to fall, but she still followed me all the way.

"Look....."

I turned around and called out to her. She was startled, and fidgeted about three meters behind me.

"W-What?"

"Could it be that you have forgotten your way back?"

Since her skin is a lot fairer than those of a typical Japanese person, it was really obvious when she blushed. Though she shook her head furiously, it seemed like I had hit the spot. I couldn't help but give a sigh,





"Well, I was lost the first time I came here as well."

One single step in the wrong direction while on the path from the seaside to the station is all it takes for one to get lost.

"It's not my first time. I've probably been here three times already."

"So you still can't remember the route despite coming here three times....."

"I've already said that's not how it is!"

"Why don't you go back by yourself then."

"Uh....."

She gritted her teeth and glared at me. I had no choice but to cease arguing with her, and walked out of the forest quietly. While on our way, I saw a purple colored truck passing by us, it's probably there to dump some trash. The forest regained its deep silence as the truck went further away. The faint sounds of the truck, together with the sounds caused by the rubbing of tree branches, made me recall the rich ensemble of the piano concerto.

That was indeed a stunning experience that made me breathless. However, that miracle probably wouldn't have happened if this girl didn't play the piano at such a special place. I stole glances at her as I walked on ahead.

Then again, where exactly did I see her before? Could she be a forgotten friend of mine? Why else would she be so brazenly willful in front of me?

That couldn't be, right?





If I knew a girl who left such a deep impression on me, I would not have forgotten her.

After walking to the small town between the mountains and the sea that is filled with plenty of ramps and slopes, the cluster of houses suddenly came into sight along with the train station. Almost all of the decorative lights on the archway of the shopping street were no longer lit up, while the four story high building, which is a relic from the Shouwa era, had a Glico advertisement board on its roof. How very nostalgic. To the left, a sign with the JR logo as well as the station's name was hanging from the top of what looks like a prefab house. Aside from both of us, and a few stray cats that were scrounging for leftovers, there were no other moving things at the entrance of the soba shop.

"Here we are."

"I can see that."

That was all she said, before she rushed to the entrance of the station.

I stood blankly at my spot, and considered what I should do next, but I could not even call out her name. Couldn't help it. That was the first time I met her, and she asked me to forget all about her as well.

I should just head back to collect some junk.

I turned away from her, and just as I was about to leave, someone spoke,

"Hey you."





The voice belonged to a middle-aged policeman, who was walking out of the small police station opposite to the bus rotary. Seemed like I was not the one he was referring to though. She was petrified, and timidly turned around. The policeman went up and asked, "Eh, ain't you Miss Ebisawa?"

"..... Eh? Urm, well....."

Her face was ghostly white from the shock.

"Ahh, I'm right. Even your clothes fit the description. Your family's looking for you, right? Seems like you came somewhere around here the last time you ran away from home as well. In any case, follow me. I'll contact your family members."

A runaway girl huh..... Seemed to be a repeat offender too, so it's best that I do not associate myself with her. Just as I resumed walking and went past the policeman, I could feel her staring at me, requesting for my help. Damn, I still noticed it in the end.

It was as though her earnest and teary gaze was saying: I'll hate you for life if you don't help me.

Stop it, me. Ignore her.

But it was all too late. I'm not fit to be a human being should I choose to walk away silently after seeing that gaze of hers.

"Urm....."

Looking at the sweat-drenched back of the policeman, I spoke. He was about to take the girl back to the police station, and the expression on his face as he turned around





seemed to be suggesting that he had only noticed my presence just now.

"I think you have mistaken her for someone else. You see, this girl here is on a trip with me."

"Huh?"

The policeman's expression became funny, as though he had accidentally chewed on a snail or something.

"Hey, let's go quickly. We'll have to wait for a long time if we miss the incoming train."

"Ah, uh..... mmm."

She scooted away from the policeman as I gave him a nod, and together we briskly walked towards the train station. I didn't know if he understood what I had just said, but there's no point in sticking around either.

After purchasing the ticket and passing through the gates, we sneaked a peek at the direction of the bus rotary.

"Will that work..... You'll play along with me if the policeman catches on to us, right?"

"I, I....." the girl held onto her ticket, and shifted her sight away from my face. "I didn't ask for your help!"

"Fine, I'll just get the policeman then. It's not good to lie."

The girl's face turned red, and she didn't speak a word. However, she slapped my





back repeatedly.

"The next time you run away from home, choose a location where your parents won't find you!"

"That's not it! Things are not like what you think....."

So it seems like I was the one acting like a busybody. It couldn't be that she was actually hating me? Hey, I offered her help!

She suppressed her anger, and shot a glare at me, then walked towards the platform that is linked to the Kudari line. The opposite direction as me huh. I was slightly relieved, but felt a small sense of pity at the same time.

Just then, the station played a tune that signifies the arrival of the train. It's a very familiar tune - Mozart's [<Twelve Variations on "Ah vous dirai-je, Maman">](#).

"Ah....."

The bulb in my head lit up all of a sudden. I got it! I remembered who she is. Yeah, didn't the police officer say earlier that her family's name is Ebisawa?

"Ebisawa..... Mafuyu?"

She was about to take the second step up the stairs, but she was so surprised she stopped in her tracks. As she turned around, her fair face was dyed red, and her pair of eyes were like the dark cloudy skies prior to a thunderous downpour.

No wonder I found her familiar - I had seen her on CD covers before, as well as on TV. She's the piano girl prodigy who became the youngest winner of the International Piano Competition held in Eastern Europe, at just the young age of





twelve. Her debut was met with a full house of applause as well. Ebisawa Mafuyu.

This mysterious lady had released quite a number of albums two and a half years ago, but she disappeared from the music scene at the age of fifteen.

And now, this mysterious figure was right in front of me, grabbing onto the handrail with an expression close to crying.

"..... You..... know me.....?"

Her stuttering voice was nearly drowned by the railway crossing, but I still nodded my head slightly. Not only do I know her, I could even remember all the titles of the songs that she had released.

"Yeah, I do. That's because I have all your CDs, and....."

"Forget it all!"

"Eh?"

"Just, forget everything!"

I wanted to say something, but I could only see her running up the stairs, her maroon hair fluttering behind her. Just then, the *ding ding ding* sounds made during the lowering of barriers of the crossing came to my ears. For a while, all I did was stand in one spot in a dazed state.

"—Hey!"

A human voice rang from my side. I turned my head, and saw a white silhouette on the platform opposite of me. We exchanged glances for a moment, and then she,





Ebisawa Mafuyu, swung her hands and threw something over.

A red object flew over the tracks. I extended my hands in an attempt to catch it, but it hit my wrists and fell next to my feet. It was a can of cola.

The train drove in between us.

She stepped onto the train, and it left the station after closing its doors, leaving me all by myself on the platform. The coke was rolling on the asphalt and was about to fall onto the tracks, but I picked it up before it was too late. It's still cold, so she probably bought it from the vending machine over there. Could she actually be treating this as a sort of thank you gift?

Ebisawa Mafuyu.

I've heard all her CDs, though obviously they were not bought by me. Those were given to my father for free, as he is a music critic. His collection of music increases by about a few hundred CDs each month, but her works are the only ones that I will not get tired of listening to. In fact, even the track order has left a deep impression on me. I enjoyed seeking those unintentional glimpses of warm pulses amid that clear, steady and inanimate melody.

Then I thought about the piece she played at the dumping ground, that piece should not be in any of her CDs, right? If I had heard of it from the CDs, then I would have definitely remembered it.

What exactly did she face and encounter?

She's not someone to play such a depressing tune.

Her last words kept reverberating in my ears, 'Just, forget everything!'





I grabbed onto the cola, and sat on a bench. That intriguing piano concerto and her voice echoed in my head, until my train arrived.

That was what happened to me during the spring break before high school, that unbelievable coincidence.

When I returned home, I continuously played the <Twelve Variations on "Ah vous dirai-je, Maman"> recorded by Mafuyu in her CD. As I listened to it, I recalled the incidents of that day, and couldn't help but wonder if everything was just a dream. That's because there was no way those junk could resonate to a piano, and it's also impossible for them to give off the sound of an orchestra.

The only evidence that could prove the reality of everything was the cola she gave (?) me, which exploded on me the instant I pulled open the tab. Man, you really can't shake or throw carbonated drinks. After wiping the floor clean with a piece of cloth, it felt like the only remaining sense of reality was gone as well.

Even if she didn't want me to forget all that, I would have probably done so anyway. I am a busy man, and I can't even remember the dreams I had two days ago.

At that time, I obviously had no idea that I'll reunite with Mafuyu again under those situations.





Chapter 2

Flower Field, The Forgotten Music Room



*But Nao has no other specialty
other than music, right?*





There is a sort of relationship in this world, which is the unsavory type, and that's the sort of relationship that Aihara Chiaki and I share. Since our houses are located close to each other, it's only natural for us to attend the same school from our days in elementary school till middle school. However, we were in the same class for nine consecutive years, and we even managed to get into the same high school. There may be some who might say that it's because our intelligence is roughly the same, but the problem is we've both been assigned to the Third Class of First Year. What can I say, other than our unsavory ties are extremely deep.

"Isn't this great? I'm poor at Math and English, so I can copy Nao's notes. Nao's not too good with sports, but I am. Let's help each other from now on." Not long after the end of the opening ceremony, Chiaki said that while slapping my back with a *papapa* sound, in our classroom that was still lingering with the smell of wax. You're good at sports, but how are you gonna assist me with that?

"This guy's impressive. You'll see a mountain of CDs when you open his door, and they will all come tumbling down."

"Wow, why is that? Is his house a music shop or something?"

"Why have you been to his house before?"

Using me as a stepping stone, Chiaki had quickly blended herself in with the rest of our female classmates which she had only met not too long ago. She and I are the only two to enroll in this high school from our middle school, so there isn't a single person whom we are familiar with. Her adaptability is really scary.

"Hey, what's your relationship with her?"

A guy who was quite interested in me leaned over and asked me with a whisper.





"Eh? Ah, it's nothing, we just studied in the same middle school."

"But didn't you help her tie her bow-tie prior to the opening ceremony?" Another guy suddenly spoke from behind me, and caused my face to go green from the shock. They saw?

"Urm..... Well, that's because....."

"Really!? Oh damn! Are you two a married couple!?"

"Isn't that the opposite from your normal situation? It should be the girl helping the guy!" They are picking that sort of difficult-to-explain situation as a conversation topic. Damn, I hate Chiaki for that. I've taught her many times already - at the very least, remember how to tie those bow-ties by yourself!

"Have both of you been together since middle school?"

I shook my head for a few hundred times so as to deny it fervently, and all the guys around me heaved a sigh of relief. They pulled me away from the girls, and the group of us moved to a corner of the classroom. They then began to talk in whispers.

"Aihara Chiaki's one the few top graded goods in our class! That's just great."

"I originally thought I liked girls with long hair, but I realized now that I was wrong."

I listened to the guys' assessments with a dumbfounded expression, then looked at Chiaki's profile, who was still sitting on the table and chatting on the other side of the classroom. Her hairstyle back then was extremely short, and it parted down the center, which made her look really fierce. Since she left her club during the autumn of our third year, however, she began growing her hair. Now, her short hair looks





prettier and more feminine. But wait, the problem is..... "That girl has a volatile temper, and is a beginner dan in Judo as well. Don't you think it's better if you guys stay away from her?"

"She's in the Judo club? Should I go join them as well?"

"Do we have a Judo club here?"

"Even then, most Judo clubs split up the guys and the girls."

"Why must they be separated? They should allow everyone to practice *prone techniques* together!" [TLNote: 寝技 (*ne-waza*), techniques in Judo. Wiki to learn more]

Can you guys listen to what others have to say?

But as she sustained a back injury last year, she is no longer practicing Judo. At about the same time when our enrollment into high school was confirmed, for some unknown reason, she began learning the drums. But then again, she had zero interest in music back in the past, and she probably couldn't start practicing on the drums by herself, right? As for her reason for wanting to be a drummer, this is what Chiaki told me—

"Back during the new year, when the doctor told me I could no longer practice Judo, I drank a bit of beer out of desperation....." The underage shouldn't be drinking! "As I fell asleep in my drunken state, Bonzo appeared in my dreams."

Bonzo is the drummer of Led Zeppelin, and he died from suffocation because he inhaled his own vomit after puking in his drunken stupor. That didn't sound too good. She couldn't have seen his spirit while in a state of near death, right?





"And he said to me, 'All you have left is the drums'. Since Bonzo said that to me, I had no choice but to do it, right?"

"Was that really Bonzo?"

"I saw him continuously waving his hands at me while standing in the flower fields near the riverside. It's Bonzo alright. His Japanese was really impressive, though he spoke in Tsuguru dialect."

..... That's probably your deceased grandfather, who died last year.

It was only after entering high school, that I came to know the real reason Chiaki started practicing the drums. Everyday after school, she would continuously pester me into joining the Folk Music Research Club.

"But Nao has no other specialty other than music, right? Come on, just join us."

"You're meddling too much. Speaking of which, what's with the Folk-whatever thing? There's no such club, right?"

I tried recalling the introduction booklet of the clubs in school which I got during the opening ceremony, as well as the parade of people who were waiting at the school gates to get the new students into their respective clubs. I don't remember seeing a club with such a complicated name. And speaking of music, I am only more knowledgeable in listening.....

"The so called folk music is actually referring to rock! If we are to call ourselves a rock band directly, the teachers would never approve it; moreover, with only Kagurazaka-senpai and I, there's no way they will approve it either. So please, join





our club!"

So that's the reason for desperately trying to get me into the club huh.....

"Stop trying to get me into a club that's not even established yet! Then again, who is Kagurazaka-senpai?"

"An awesome and impressive person from the First Class of Second Year."

After a careful round of questioning, all the riddles were finally solved. It seems like Chiaki met that Kagurazaka person during summer last year. Her entering this high school via recommendations, and her reason to begin drumming, it was all because of this Kagurazaka-somebody. What a joke. I grabbed my bag and walked out of the classroom. All of our classmates were already focusing their attention on us as we had that conversation, and it felt really embarrassing. Chiaki chased me and said, "Wait for me! What's wrong with joining the club? You have nothing else going on anyway, right?"

"I won't join that club even if I have nothing to do."

"Why?"

"Because..... I won't stay long anyway."

I had originally wanted to say, "I was dragged to Judo training by you, and I gave up within a short time span of two weeks - you know that as well." However, I never said it in the end.







"Really? Then what do you plan to do in high school?"

To study - but obviously I couldn't bring myself to say such an insincere but politically-correct answer.

"Isn't your life just boring then?"

So your life's very interesting huh?

"Why do you care about whether my life is boring or not?" I said that without much thought, and Chiaki suddenly stopped in her tracks. As I turned my head backwards, I saw Chiaki shifting her sight away from me, and was looking downwards slightly. What's happening now?

Chiaki turned her head away, and asked, "..... What do you think is my reason?" I had no idea how I should reply to that.

"Because you're very free as well?"

Chiaki's hands reached out for the collars of my jacket. Before I could even think, my body had already made a spin in the air, and my back slammed against the floors of the corridor.

"..... Ow!" My eyes were filled with stars, and for a moment I could not breathe. Despite that, I tried to stand up by supporting myself on the wall with my hands.

"Stop with those random shoulder throws of yours, alright!?"

"That's not a shoulder throw. That's a body drop."

"That's not the problem here! Are you trying to kill me!?"





"I~diot!"

Chiaki stomped on my thigh, turned around, and left. What's with all that!?

My reason for not joining a club was because of an extremely negative one like "finding it all bothersome". However, aside from that, there was another reason that could be considered as something positive - I found something that I can do after school.

After watching Chiaki leave, I went to the first floor, and came to a small courtyard after walking out of the school's back gates. Next to a rusty rubbish incinerator that hasn't been used in a long time, stood a long narrow building. It was of a simple rectangular shape made of cement, similar to a park's public toilets. On its sides were several doors. Since it hasn't been used by anyone for quite a long time, the walls and doors of the building were covered with dirt, making it rather filthy. The private school expands for no rhyme or reason, and to add on to all that, the number of students enrolling into the school is on a steady decline - all of these have resulted in the increase of many empty facilities and classrooms that are not in use.

On the third day of school, I had discovered that one can enter a room on the left side of this building. During my school exploration, I tried turning the handle with a *kra kra* sound, and the door just opened. Later, I figured out that by pressing the door handle diagonally downwards to the right and turning it forty-five degrees, the lock will open.

In the room, there was a tall metal rack, a locker and an old study desk. The walls were pasted with a sound absorbent material, that has many equally spaced circular holes on it. From the marks left on the floor, one can deduce that this place used to





house a piano. As of now, the only thing that can be called the school's equipment, was some mini audio system placed next to the desk.

Actually, this high school is my father's alma mater. I'd once heard from him, that this school used to have a music club, but it was abolished not long after he graduated. He used to say half jokingly, "My batch of students had poor conduct, and thus the school abolished it." Then again, that may very well be the truth.

There's a perk to the sound absorbers - I can bring in a huge stack of my CDs to this room, and listen to my favorite songs as loudly as I liked. It's a good way to kill time after school. Should I be at home, my father will definitely be there blasting his classical music records, resulting in me not having a place where I could enjoy my music in peace.

Since the condition of the room isn't too good, the sound proofing is not perfect. I'll have to stuff a towel into the gaps around the door before I can turn on the audio system. On that day, the first CD I listened to was the live album by Bob Marley, and was led into a reggae mood. I was probably affected by what Chiaki said.

Isn't your life just boring?

I had never thought about that. Then again, it is quite a headache for me if my life is deemed boring just because I did not join a club. Isn't this just fine - you can consider it to be a Music Appreciation Club! I'm not causing trouble for anyone either. I am using this room without any prior approval, but since this classroom seemed to not be in use for a long period of time, plus the fact that I'll keep the classroom clean - as long as I ensure that no one outside can hear the music that I'm playing, it should be fine, right?





Chapter 3

Lies, Bento, Partita



I don't want to write my name.





During homeroom in the early morning, when our tutor - nicknamed Retiree (because he looked like Mito Koumon) - brought that girl into the classroom, the atmosphere of the class froze in an instant. I didn't notice the change in the atmosphere due to me snoozing while listening to my discman. [TLNote: 水戸黄門, title character of a drama. Wiki if interested.]

It was only after Chiaki, who was sitting in front of me, turned around and prodded my shoulder, that I hurriedly removed my earphones. Regardless of whether it is homeroom or not, the classroom will always be filled with chatter in the early morning. However, I could only hear a few of my classmates whispering at the time.

"Hey, she is....."

"Yup, should be."

"Ebisawa—"

"Eh~? The very person? Didn't they say that her whereabouts are unknown?"

I took a look at the lecture stand, and my discman nearly fell onto the ground. The girl on the stand wore her hair at her back. Since it was the same exact hairstyle as that in the advertisements, everyone recognized her instantly. It was indeed Ebisawa Mafuyu herself. She was wearing our school uniform, but it felt like someone was playing a joke on us. What's with this? I didn't catch what Retiree had said, and for a moment I couldn't understand the fact that she was transferring into our school.

"Let us have Ebisawa do an introduction of herself."

Retiree said that leisurely, and passed the chalk to her. Mafuyu pinched the chalk with only her thumb and index finger. After staring at it uneasily for some time with her face turning pale, she spun around to face the blackboard. Just then, the chalk





slipped from her long slender fingers, and the unexpectedly sharp breaking sound broke the silence of the classroom.

An asphyxiating silence followed. All Mafuyu did was motionlessly stare at the (probably shattered) chalk. Retiree was just stroking his prided goatee slowly, but even for us students who had just been in school for a month, we all knew that action was a sign that our teacher was uncertain of what was happening.

"Mmm, well....." Our teacher barely made a sound, and after picking up the chalk which was broken in half, he handed it to Mafuyu. However, as Mafuyu took the chalk, her fingers were already trembling in full sight for all to see.

At last, Mafuyu looked at the floor and shook her head. She placed the chalk into the chalk-holder.

"I don't want to write my name."

Just as she said that, it felt like the air of the classroom was electrified. Wait, what exactly is that lass saying?

"It's just a name, so that should be fine, right?" Retiree said. He was speaking slowly and in a low tone, but he was obviously at a loss of what to do since his hands were moving about next to his thighs.

"I don't want to."

"Mmmmm..... Why?"

"I don't like my family's name."

Mafuyu's words had an effect similar to pouring liquid air into the already frozen





classroom. I noticed Mafuyu's expression as she bit into her lower lips. It was the same as that day - the day when we first met, the expression she had when we parted.

But of course, I didn't say a word. The one to save the day was a female classmate sitting at the front of the classroom.

"It doesn't matter, teacher. We all know her name already."

"Yeah. Her name's Ebisawa Mafuyu, right?"

"Yup—"

The atmosphere of the class became really strange. Whispers like "She's that pianist" and "I've seen her on ads", were going off one after another. I noticed that Mafuyu's slender limbs were trembling slightly due to the reaction of our classmates. I was perhaps the only one to notice the signs of danger.

"Ah, mmm, if so....." Retiree looked at Mafuyu, and said calmly, "Ebisawa, do you have anything to say to your classmates?"

A girl suddenly raised her hands and asked, "May I know when you'll be releasing your next album?"

I didn't quite recall that girl's name, but I do remember her as a chatterbox. That question spearheaded the onslaught of questions.

"Didn't you say you would be studying at the College of Music?"

"There isn't any new advertisement with you in it. Why is that?"

Some of the guys who were still confused about the situation asked,





"What advertisement?" "It's that insurance ad. You mean you don't know?" "Ah, that ad. I do." "Hmm? Really?" The classroom suddenly became noisy.

Mafuyu was looking at the ceiling with a stern face, and it was then when she suddenly spoke with a sharp, ringing voice,

"Please forget everything."

The silence that engulfed the classroom was like the frozen surface of a lake.

Mafuyu's strained voice continued to reverberate in the classroom - just like back then.

"..... I'll be gone in June, so please forget me."

Not one person spoke after hearing Mafuyu say that, nor did anyone know what should be said. The thing that saved us from being at a loss of what to do, was the bell that signified the end of homeroom.

"Ah, i-is that so? Then..... Mafuyu, please take a seat over there."

Retiree pointed to the back of the classroom. As I came back to my senses, I realized that there was an unoccupied seat to my left.

"The class representative is Terada, so feel free to clarify with her about any doubts that you may have."

Terada was the very first classmate that asked Mafuyu a question. Retiree then clipped the attendance records and the already bundled lecture notes under his arms, and briskly walked out of the classroom.





Mafuyu took a gulp, and regulated her breathing slightly. She then surveyed the classroom once with a hostile and wary stare, before quietly stepping down from the lecture stand. The classroom was dead silent. Everyone stared at her every movement as she walked down the aisle between the desks. Could it be that Mafuyu would disappear in an instant should the stares stop for a brief moment? Nah, that sounds so incredibly stupid - it's impossible, but I still joined in anyway. It was perhaps due to all the staring, but Mafuyu was deliberately hiding her face as she passed by my seat. The sound of footsteps suddenly stopped next to me—

"—Ah!"

She noticed. Mafuyu pointed her slightly shaking finger at me, and shouted in shock, "W-W-Why are you here?" I hugged my head with my arms, and laid on the table. I realized that everyone in class had their eyes set on me. Give me a break.

"What? You two know each other?"

Chiaki looked at Mafuyu, and then at me. I repeatedly shook my head, as though I wanted to wipe the table clean with my forehead.

"No no no, I don't know her. She must have gotten the wrong person."

But Mafuyu said, "Why are you lying!?"

"You're the one who wanted me to forget you, right?"

"See, you remember! I've asked you to forget me!"

Ahhhh..... I don't know anymore.

"Mmm, that's why I'm telling you, I've forgotten everything already. Who are you





again?"

"Liar!"

I guess our conversation must have sounded really retarded. The discussions between our classmates were getting louder and louder, while Chiaki's curious stare was even more piercing. Second period was olden literature which I hated the most, but at that very moment, the sight of that old hag language teacher was like a savior in my very eyes.

Even if I factor in her unbelievably beautiful face and that celebrity status of hers, Mafuyu is the type of girl that I do not want to get close to willingly. Ever since the day she transferred here, she would be surrounded by groups of curious girls and was asked a lot of questions. But except for the occasional "Don't know" and "I do not wish to answer", she hardly answered any of the questions.

"Why did she transfer here at such a strange time?"

During our lunch break, Chiaki looked at the group of people and softly asked,

"Our school is just an ordinary high school, and she picked fine arts as her elective. So why?"

In our school, we have to pick either music, fine arts or calligraphy as our arts elective. Honestly speaking, it's rather strange for a pianist to not pick the field in which she's good at.

"Just ask the person in question and you'll get the answer."





Chiaki shook her hands and said, "I can't break past that human wall that's surrounding her." She then took some of the stuff from my bento and ate them with huge bites. Recently, I've prepared more food in my bento, in anticipation of her grabbing a portion of it.

"Then again, when and where did you meet her?"

"..... In my dreams?"

"Want to take a trip to the infirmary?"

"Nope. Man, it's tough to explain everything."

"There's still a long way to go before lunch break is over, so you can explain everything from the beginning." Chiaki's eyes were giving off an unyielding look despite her smile. As I was trying to avoid the topic, she had already finished my bento as quicky as she could.

Mafuyu continued with her anti-social behavior during lessons without caring the least bit - she didn't take notes, and her textbooks frequently dropped onto the floor. There were some teachers that didn't give her any special treatment despite her being a transfer student, and immediately asked her to go up to the lecture stand; but she insisted on remaining at her seat by replying, "I don't want to." To be honest, I thought she was really cool, since I couldn't have done that even if I wanted to. From what Chiaki told me, all she did during physical education was sit and look on from the sidelines.

During lunch break of the second day after her transfer, it seemed like Mafuyu was finding the situation of being surrounded by the curious girls to be slightly unbearable, and had sought for my help quite a few times by looking at me pleadingly through the gaps of the human wall. Well, I can't help even if you want





me to.

Most of the questions asked by the girls were mundane things like, what sort of place the studio was like; which celebrities were at the broadcasting company, and if she had met any of them. Just as I was about to pull out my chair and scoot away from that group of people, I heard someone slamming the table with a sudden *bam*. I turned my head over, and saw Mafuyu standing in the center of the group of girls, and pointing at me through a slit in the human wall. She said with tears in her eyes, "Go ask that guy over there. That pervert owns all of my albums, and he should know a lot about me."

Eh? What?

Mafuyu kicked the chair down, then ran past me and out of the classroom in a flash.

Countless stares landed on me, and class-rep Terada was the first to speak, "..... What's the relationship between this pervert and Ebisawa?" Why the heck are you calling me a pervert!?

"From the conversation you had with her, it sounded like you knew her beforehand."

"Yeah."

Damn that girl, she actually said something as irresponsible as that, just so she could run away from all of them.....

A certain guy said, "This dude probably knows her because his dad is a music critic."

"Ah, classical music, huh."

"Then you know her already?"





"Your dad should know plenty of things about her, right?"

"Ask a few questions when you get back home! Things like why Ebisawa chose to study at this school. Ebisawa refuses to say anything about herself."

I can't possibly know things like that, right? You guys think the world of classical music is small? Though I was thinking of that, I gave an ambiguous nod so as to escape from the scene.

Even so, she still wished to talk to Mafuyu despite being treated so coldly by her. Was that the class-rep's kind attempts to let Mafuyu blend in with the class, or was it all due to her high endurance born out of curiosity? I had no idea. Perhaps it was a little of both.

After returning home that day, I finally understood how small the world really is.

"Tetsurou, do you still remember Ebisawa Mafuyu?"

As I was preparing dinner, I threw my father that question, who was in the dining room at that point of time. I have already forgotten when I started to call my father by his name - probably sometime after my mother left home? I don't know why, but I could no longer treat him as my father shortly after that.

Tetsurou was squatting on the chair in his jersey. He was drumming on the bowl with his chopsticks to the rhythm of Tchaikovsky's Waltz, which was blaring loudly from the speakers. He repeatedly shouted, "Dinner's not ready yet?" Is that how a man in his forties - and with a son as well - should be acting?





"..... What did you just say?"

Tetsurou turned his head over, but his hands continued drumming the bowl. A sudden anger swelled up inside of me. I snatched away the chopsticks, and switched off the speakers. Tetsurou did nothing but pout like a kid.

"What I asked was, do you still remember someone named Ebisawa Mafuyu?"

"Hmm? Yeah, I do. Ebisawa Mafuyu, huh, Bach still suits her the best. There are some parts that don't flow smoothly in nearly all of his partita, but that's the fascinating point about them. Occasionally, there's the emergence of a few youngsters who can play Bach's music amazingly well. Take for example....."

"Enough, I don't want to listen to your views on those things."

Forget it. She's probably one out of the many pianists in Tetsurou's eyes, so it's understandable for him to only talk about things related to music. Just as I was walking back into the kitchen while thinking that, Tetsurou spoke yet again,

"But I heard that she transferred to your school?"

"How did you know?"

I turned around in surprise, and nearly fell after kicking the pot.

"Ebichiri and I are old classmates from your school. And since Ebichiri is the school's director, he would definitely force her to study there unreasonably."

"Ah..... right, she's his daughter."

Ebisawa Chisato - or commonly referred to as Ebichiri - is one of the few rare





conductors who are well known. He used to be a full-time conductor for the Symphonic Orchestra of Boston and Chicago, and is a world renowned musician as well. Incidentally, Tetsurou was the one who gave him that nickname - critics are a really scary bunch of people. [TLNote: Ebichiri's actually [shrimp in chili sauce](#), and quite obviously it sounded similar to his original name]

One of the topics that were widely discussed during Mafuyu's debut, was that her father is 'the world renowned Ebichiri'. There should be some who have tried to get the father and daughter pair to perform on the same stage, but Mafuyu disappeared from the music scene before any such performance became a reality.

"The thing is, our school no longer has music as a core subject, so why did she still transfer here?"

"I heard it was due to the constant complaints from his daughter. It had already been decided that she would be enrolling into the College of Music, but the daughter said she didn't want to. He was left with no choice but to allow her to study at a normal high school, and thus she transferred to your school. She no longer plays the piano, right? I felt she was one those destructive type of pianists after listening to her pieces for the very first time. Her countermelody sounds like a quarrel among family members."

Hmm? But.....

I heard her playing the piano that day at <The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>.

She..... no longer plays the piano? Why?

"Oi, dinner's not ready yet?"

"Dinner's~ not ready~ yet?" Tetsurou began to sing those words along with the tune





of [<Non più andrai>](#) from <The Marriage of Figaro>. Damn, you're noisy. Go chew on your records or something!

If she has really given up on the piano for some reason, and chose to enroll in my school instead of the College of Music at the very last minute, then it makes sense for the strange time of her transfer. Still, why did she give up on the piano?

I shook my head and no longer wished to think deeper into it. Should they hear the things that my father just said, my classmates would probably think that I really know a great deal about Mafuyu. We're just classmates who sit next to each other, and it seems like she has something which she doesn't want anyone to know about. Since it'll be impossible for her to interfere with my life by her own accord, the only thing I can do is to ignore it, right?

However, Mafuyu came barging into my life the very next day—

— In a totally unexpected way.





Chapter 4

Stratocaster, Red Tea



*Don't go about combining
things randomly!*





When school ended, Mafuyu disappeared from the classroom in a flash. Ever since her transfer here, her whereabouts had become the biggest mystery for the Third Class of First Year.

"Her shoes were still in the shoe cabinet, so I don't think she's heading straight home after school."

"Class-rep, when did you leave school yesterday?"

"Hmm— about five."

"I saw Mafuyu near the staff room."

Homeroom's about to start, but Mafuyu's no where in sight. A group of girls had gathered around her desk (which is right next to me), and were exchanging information they had among themselves. Stop meddling in other people's affairs already!

"I thought she liked drawing since she chose fine arts as her elective, so I tried inviting her to the arts club..... but she ran away after saying some strange stuff to me. What's with that!"

"Speaking of which, that girl does nothing at all during the lessons, right? All she did was open up her sketch book and leave it there! Is there something wrong with her brain?"

"She should just choose music instead. She's causing a lot of problems for the teachers as well, right?"

Everyone's appraisal of Mafuyu was sliding down further as they continued talking, though that was to be expected.





"Pervert, do you know anything about her?"

They suddenly involved me in the conversation.

"Can you please not address me like that....."

"Then how about 'Mafuyu's Exclusive Critic'?"

"Wow, that sounds like a stalker."

"I don't want that either."

"Then how about I combine both to make it 'Perverted Critic'?"

"Don't go about combining things randomly!" Due to Mafuyu's baseless slanders, I was facing a crisis in my life. "We just met once before the school opened, so I knew nothing about her."

What's with those stares of disbelief!

The bell began to ring, but Mafuyu was still not in the classroom, and Chiaki still hadn't arrived either, as usual. It seemed like she was practicing the drums somewhere every morning. The advantage of being a drummer is that you can practice just about anywhere, so long as you have a pair of drumsticks, a metronome and a stack of old magazines.

The moment the bell finished ringing and the teacher started closing the attendance book, the door at the back of the class suddenly opened.

"I'm safe! I'm safe, right?" Chiaki shouted while dashing into the classroom, and for





some unknown reason, she was pulling Mafuyu along as well. The silent Mafuyu showed a grumpy expression, and flung Chiaki's hand away.

Our teacher's nice though, and said to them, "I won't consider you two as late, so take your seats immediately." If Chiaki was alone, our teacher probably would have marked her as late without hesitation.

"Sorry, but lend me your notes for a while. I'll copy it quickly."

Chiaki snatched my notebook after sitting down.

I looked at her back as she copied my notes furiously, and asked softly, "What were you two doing just now?"

"I was practicing at the corridors on the third floor, and I saw Mafuyu. It seemed like she was lost."

"I was not lost....." Mafuyu mumbled. I secretly cast a glance at her - she seemed slightly angry, and her face was quite flushed too. This means..... that this girl actually has a really poor sense of direction? The school is quite big, but it is quite ridiculous to get lost trying to get to your classroom, right?

"I made a detour to the music room, and on my way back....."

"Alright, I am about to start the lesson, so you two stop your chit-chatting," the teacher snapped, and our classmates gave a stifled laughter.

The music room? Why there? My doubts lasted for a brief moment though, as the teacher suddenly called me out to answer the questions in our assignments. With that, the only thing I could do was to focus on snatching my notebook back from Chiaki.





As usual, I escaped from Chiaki's attempts to rope me into the club after school. I made a trip down to the library to return the books I had borrowed, before walking towards the direction of the abandoned classroom behind the main building of the school. Just as I turned past the corner of the building and saw the chimney of the incinerator, the faint sounds of an electric guitar drifted into my ears.

It came from the classroom which I've been using. And I suddenly thought: did I leave the room with a CD still playing? Shit! But as I approached the door and listened, I realized that wasn't the case. From within the classroom, came a tune that I hadn't heard of before, but I was very familiar with the melody all the same.

Liszt's <[Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2](#)>.

This is an extremely difficult piano solo. During the endearing friska, the tune will be accompanied by notes that are played repeatedly at blazing speeds; moreover, what I was listening to is the [guitar version](#). What's this? I don't have such an amazing CD..... no, wait, this is live - so there's someone playing it right now, with the electric guitar plugged into the amplifier that I had modified. [TLNote: I found a vid done in electric guitar, so there you go. I think Mafuyu's version is probably crazier than that though.]

I couldn't help it, but I was having goosebumps. It's impossible for a tune like this to be played by a person alone, even if he possessed four hands. However, the melody that was flowing into my ears definately came from a single guitar. So who could that person be.....?

I grabbed the door handle.

Just then, that grand piano which was buried in the dumping grounds appeared in my





mind.

I pushed the handle down diagonally, and turned it at the same time. *Kacha*— a muffled metallic sound was heard, and I could feel the sensation of the lock coming loose through my palms. Just as I opened the door, the music came to a screeching halt.

Mafuyu was sitting on the long desk and looking at me with a stunned expression. Her varnished guitar nearly slipped off her legs. I guess my expression then was probably the same as hers.

Why— is Mafuyu here? In my classroom (which I'm using without permission), and holding onto a guitar? What the heck is going on here? When and how did this dream start? Could it be, that everything that dates back to my encounter with her during the spring holidays was just a dream—

"..... Why?"

Mafuyu regained her senses a tad bit quicker and spoke first. I took a small leap backwards in shock as well.

"Eh? Ah, no..... wait, stop, you will kill me if you hit me with that guitar of yours!"

Mafuyu's face was flushed red, and she swung that slightly heavy Stratocaster of hers at me while she was chasing me. I slammed the door shut so as to escape from her.

"..... Why are you here? Pervert! Stalker!"

Mafuyu's shrieks came through the gaps of the door. Wait, I should be the one asking that question!





"I've been using this classroom all along, so why did you go in by yourself?" Though I was also using it without permission.....

"I..... I obtained permission from Miss Mukoujima before entering."

"Eh?"

Miss Mukoujima Maki, though everyone calls her Maki. She is a young music teacher who everyone finds approachable and yet scary at the same time. I see, so that was the reason for her going to the music room in the morning? No, wait, why was she given permission to use the classroom? So that means if I had asked the teacher for permission, I would also be permitted to use the classroom?

"Just scram already!"

She was saying that, but I had already moved in a huge stack of my CDs, refitted a component amplifier, and had even prepared some cushions - I'd wasted so much effort to make this classroom as comfortable as possible! Even if you want me to disappear, you can't possibly expect me to say, "Alright, so be it" and obediently leave as I was told!

"..... Eh, what's happening here? Why would the teacher....."

She didn't reply, instead the sound of a huge claw scraping against the walls could be heard - it was the electric guitar's feedback. Stop that, or else the amplifier will break down!

All I could do was sigh and move away from the classroom door.





Back in the school building, a surge of anger swelled up from within me as I was walking through the corridor. That was obviously my territory - she came later, but there she was, sitting in there comfortably. Who can possibly accept that? If that's the case, I'll complain to Miss Maki. However, the anger died down in me as I approached the doors of the music preparation room. A huge poster of Ohtsuki Kenji was pasted on the sliding door - could Miss Maki be a fan of the rock band Kinniku Shoujo Tai? Also, is it fine for her to be pasting such a thing openly onto the entrance of the staff room? [TLNote: I guess everything that you may want to know can be found via [here](#) and its links.]

I had a staring contest with Ohtsuki Kenji as I tried to calm myself down. I could faintly hear the relaxing melody of a concert band practicing next door - it's the [background music](#) of the simulation game <Take the 'A' Train>. [TLNote: not quite sure if the linked music is it, but it probably is. Game's A列車でいこう. Quite a nice tune btw.]

Regardless of what you say, you've also used the classroom without permission — should I complain to Miss Maki, then I'll get in trouble as well.

Mmm, even so, if you want me to just back out like that, then—

"Yes? Looking for me?"

I jumped in shock from a voice that suddenly came from behind me, and my forehead slammed into the face of Ohtsuki Kenji. I turned my head around, and saw Miss Maki standing behind me with a light smile on her face. She was wearing a white blouse and a mini skirt — as she is so disturbingly suitable for that sort of attire, the students call her the 'Erotic Teacher' in secret. She is the reason that the first year guys who had chosen fine arts or calligraphy as their electives lived in regret. However, after attending her lessons, it was the guys who had chosen music as their elective that are the ones who have the deepest regrets now.





"Eh? Ah, nothing."

"It's fine, just come on in. I was thinking of having tea. Want to join me?"

With that, Miss Maki dragged me into the preparatory room.

The music preparatory room is only about half the size of a normal classroom. As there is a shelf filled with musical scores, as well as an upright piano, the place is pretty cramped.

"Oh, there's hot water in the teapot, and the teabags are in the drawer. Also, cut a slice of honey cake while you're at it."

So you're delegating all the stuff onto me?

"Ah, just a cup of tea will do, and slice the cake into three pieces."

"Eh? Miss Maki's not having any?"

"What are you talking about? It's for me, of course. I never mentioned anything about you getting some."

What else can I say?

"If you want to drink some tea no matter what, I can let you suck on those tasteless used-teabags."

No thanks. Ahh, I wanna go home already.....

Miss Maki patted me on my back and said that it was just a joke. I was finally able to





take a seat on the chair after I was done preparing two portions of tea and cakes. Just then, Miss Maki suddenly said,

"You're here to talk about the music building, right?"

I nearly spat out my sip of tea.

"H-How did you know?"

"Ara ara. I know everything already. Like how you've been using the classroom without permission for two weeks; how you've modified the CD player to link it to an external input-device; or how you've fixed the reception cables for the radio..... and how the cushions are really comfortable to sit on....."

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

I was honestly considering if I should just hide under the table or something. No wait, if I do that, I'll just get slaughtered by Miss Maki.







"But since you cleaned up the place really well, I turned a blind eye to it. I'm the only one who noticed anyway."

"Sorry sorry, I won't do it again."

"Since Mafuyu can use the classroom straight away as it is, the timing is just perfect."

I released my arms that were hugging my head, and looked at Miss Maki's face.

She said while laughing, "You are here to complain about that, right?"

"No..... I am in no position to be complaining anyway."

"It's fine with me if you want to use it. I can't be rejecting you after granting Mafuyu special permission to use that room. You two should try to get along well with each other."

"No, that is quite impossible."

Speaking of which, I was totally confused about the situation.

"Could it be, that Miss Maki and Mafuyu already knew each other?"

"Yes. I was a student of her father, and I used to play with Mafuyu all the time."

Miss Maki's expression was slightly lonely.

"As for Mafuyu..... something happened, and she ended up transferring to this school. She then told me she wanted a room that she can use by herself. This is just the Director's daughter being willful, but since she isn't causing problems for





anyone....."

"I see....." So the staff had silently agreed to it already.

"So you can use that classroom too, if you are willing to share it with Mafuyu."

So ultimately, I was the one who was chased out!

"But, why is she playing the guitar? I've heard that she no longer plays the piano, is that true? She was originally going to the College of Music, right? Why did she transfer to our school?"

"I can't be the one to tell you all that....." Miss Maki's expression became serious immediately. "..... Moreover, she herself doesn't want anyone to know. To be honest..... I think it's better if she doesn't do that, but ultimately, the decision lies in Mafuyu's hands."

I don't have the slightest idea of what was going on around here, and Mafuyu didn't explain anything to me either.

Because of that, the biggest problem facing me was what to do about that classroom. If the case was that the school found out that I was using the classroom without permission, and angrily banned me from using it ever again, I would have given up immediately. However, if you want me to sit next to Mafuyu and listen to my CDs while she plays the guitar, there was absolutely no way I could do that, no matter what!

"Why don't you try talking to her, to see if you two can share the classroom?"

"But she was trying to smack me to death with that guitar of hers when I tried talking to her?"





"You give up really fast! How can a youngster be like that?"

After a sudden round of reprimanding from Miss Maki, I was finally allowed to leave the music preparatory room.





Chapter 5

Toccata, Padlock, Revolution

*Born to lose.
Don't you think this song
exists just for you?*





To be honest, I didn't tell Mafuyu something — there is a major problem with that classroom: the gaps of the door. The soundproofing in the classroom isn't perfect, so sound will travel out of the room. Due to that, a rumor about how "a very impressive guitar solo can be heard from the school's courtyard after school" had spread throughout the school a few days later.

"Which piece? Is it that <ちゃらり ~鼻から牛乳~>?" [TLNote: It is roughly translated as '[Cyarari ~Spitting Milk from the Nose~](#)', and the thing can be seen via the link. Thanks to Alice for pointing the vid out, cause I had no freaking idea what it was.]

"I've heard that before too. I'll get dizzy if I listen to it for too long."

So it's actually Bach's <[Toccat and Fugue in D minor, BWV 565](#)>. That lass really likes Bach, huh? It wasn't time for homeroom yet, and I was listening halfheartedly to the broadcast of the girls' morning gossip, while recalling the pieces Mafuyu played.

"She played <[Farewell](#)> yesterday too. It was so~ very fast. Originally I couldn't figure out what piece it was." [TLNote: I guess the piece is more widely known as <Tristessel>, but <Farewell>'s the lesser-known name (in the english community at least) that is used in the novel. To quote wiki: ["Neither "Tristesse" \(sadness\) nor "Farewell" are names given by Chopin."](#)]

"Ah, so that's <Farewell>?"

I had heard the guitar version of <Farewell> as well. Chopin had initially composed the piece to be played at a very fast tempo - roughly four times the speed of current day interpretations - and so in a certain sense, Mafuyu's performance was actually the correct version. I wanted to say that, but everyone would definitely say I am a perverted critic or a stalker, so I chose to remain silent. Wait, what's with this? Are





the critic-genes from Tetsurou doing something weird in my body? Stop that immediately!

Our teacher opened the door before the school bell was done chiming, and Mafuyu followed behind him. The whole class suddenly sank into silence. Everyone exchanged looks with each other briefly, before returning to their own seats as though nothing had happened - the only one who was unaware of the situation was the very person herself. Even so, it seemed like Mafuyu had sensed that something was going on. As she walked towards her seat, she looked at everyone with a puzzled gaze.

"Wanna go listen today after school?"

"Then I'll have a listen before my club activities start—"

I heard people whispering that, and I also saw a few guys sneaking a few glances at Mafuyu while grinning broadly. It had been less than a week since Mafuyu's transfer here, but the number of girls who would start a conversation with her had dropped to nearly zero - she was probably being treated like a rare creature by everyone.

However, that had become quite a problem for me as well. That place was actually my resting place, and yet it was occupied by someone else. Looks like I'll have to snatch the classroom back from Mafuyu's hands.

I came up with a really despicable plan - I'll lock myself in the classroom, and with that Mafuyu will be shut out of the place. When math - which was the sixth period of the day - was over, I immediately grabbed my bag and rushed out of the classroom after bowing goodbye to the teacher.





However, I was dumbfounded when I arrived at the old music block at the back of the building. There was already a padlock hanging on the door of the classroom. Damn her, how dare she do that to my (self proclaimed) room!

While looking at the lock before me, I remembered the paper-clip and the flat-blade screwdriver that were stored in my bag. Don't underestimate the skills that I've acquired from modifying sound systems since I was young - a long, thin wire is all I need to settle a lock of that cheap caliber. No, that would be considered a crime, right? Speaking of which, it will be game over for me if I'm seen by anyone while trying to pick the lock open anyway. However, if I do it quickly, it will probably take less than a minute..... "What are you doing?"

A voice suddenly came from behind me. I nearly jumped three meters up in fright. As I turned my head—

It was actually Mafuyu. She was totally furious, and her maroon hair looked as though they were standing on her head.

"You criminal, you must've been thinking about picking the lock, right? Please do not come close to me ever again."

That is indeed the case, but on what grounds do you have the right to scold me?

"Why are you always following me?"

How mean, so she herself is treating me as a stalker too? Stalking is a criminal offense should she actually charge a complaint against me - looks like my life is in a very terrible situation right now.

"No, look..... I have always used this classroom, and that amplifier was modified by me too."





I explained while trying my hardest to hold myself back.

"You were just using it without permission!"

"But Miss Mikoujima gave me permission to use the classroom too....."

"This is a room for practice, not a place for you to laze around and waste your time while listening to CDs!"

Mafuyu pushed me aside. She opened the lock, then walked into the classroom and shut the door. I froze on the spot and thought for a few seconds. I then barged into the room without a second thought, by opening the door forcibly as though I was trying to tear it down.

"Stop treating me like an idiot who is wasting his time. Life is all about wasting time till a person dies."

"Then why don't you just die already?"

Did she just say something extremely cruel to me?

"Can't. If I die, my mother and little sister will be very sad." I allowed myself to talk nonsense. "I already know the only family you have is that useless father of yours." What's with that retort? Damn, has this lass read Tetsurou's articles already? That retarded Dad always mentions me in those articles of his. For example: "The way this conductor handles adagio is as slow as the potato salad made by my son", and stuff. However—

"I do admit he is useless, and you are free to see him as an idiot if you like. However, the person who will be troubled by all these things is me. Apologize right now -





mainly to me!"

"The very existence of critics is troublesome. They always write rubbish."

Oi oi, what's with this? Mafuyu's expressions suddenly turned solemn, and she looked like she was close to crying. Then again, why am I arguing with her in a place like this! Upon realizing that, my mind quickly cooled down.

"They are not the ones playing the pieces. All they do is listen frivolously, and then they start to talk nonsense like what you are doing right now."

"Urm, well....." Talking nonsense is actually a fault of mine — I originally wanted to say that, but after thinking deeper into it, I realized that would be a really feeble retort. As such, I could only shut my mouth.

"..... It's just guitar. I can play that too!"

Those words came out of my mouth unknowingly. They were no nonsense though.

As a guy who listens to all sorts of rock, I used to play the guitar as well, though that was something I did during the summer of my second year of middle school. I found a dusty classical guitar from the storeroom in my house back then, which I then used to practice the prelude to <[Stairway to Heaven](#)> fervently.

However, I no longer touch it anymore.

Mafuyu narrowed her eyes, and her gaze became cold. Her expression looked as though she was saying, "I bet that's just you sprouting nonsense anyway."

Just as I was about to say something again, Mafuyu suddenly took up her guitar which was leaning next to the table, and plugged it into the amplifier. She then





walked to my side, and forcibly put full-sized headphones on my head.

"Wha.....?"

"Don't move!"

She gently grabbed the pick with her two fingers, and strummed the strings of the guitar. I suddenly fell into the flow of the melody. Amid the strong discords, those ever-changing descending notes came gushing out like the waterfalls at the top of a cliff. What followed next were the grand and yet eerie arpeggio arch, as well as a well polished melody that encompasses the stamping of feet along with the dance - both of which were rising up from beneath the valleys.

That's..... Chopin's <[Étude Op. 10, No. 12](#)>

A storm raged on in my mind, but that was forcefully interrupted by the sudden cadence.

I was left dumbfounded. Mafuyu pulled off the headphones from my head, and the sounds of reality slowly crept into my ears. My heartbeats; the sounds of me breathing; the engine sounds from a faraway road; the cheers as the baseball team were running to the bases - each and every sound I heard just seemed so unreal.

Mafuyu bent down and stared at me, as though she was saying, "Does your 'playing guitar' sound something like this?" There was quite a heavy silence.

"..... Can you still say 'It's just guitar. I can play that too' with that?"

I remembered her giving a sigh as well.

I originally wanted to say, "Stop treating me like an idiot", but I really could not say





it convincingly.

"I've already said it. Get out. This is a place to practice."

"What's the big deal with playing a musical instrument?" I complained. "So your meaning is if I bring a guitar here, I'll be able to use this classroom too?"

"Don't mimic me if you lack the ability to do so. Scram!"

As I was at a loss of what to do, Mafuyu pushed me out of the classroom.

Not long after, another piece flowed through the gaps from behind the tightly shut door. It's Chopin's [<Marche Funèbre>](#) from [<Piano Sonata No. 2 in B ♭ minor>](#). She's deliberately looking for a fight? No wait, she didn't know about how the sounds could be heard from outside of the room, right? [TLNote: That's the funeral march, btw]

Damn.

I pressed my palms on the door as my head dropped downwards. For a while, I allowed my body to be seeped in the sounds of Mafuyu's guitar. It gradually turned into an unbearable pain, but I found myself unable to leave that place.

I was thinking - why guitar?

Just play your piano honestly. If so, I could have listened to you playing the piano, while naively thinking to myself, "though she's young, her techniques are really quite brilliant". Why do you have to step into my world? Nearly all the pieces that you are playing are piano pieces, right? What sort of prank is that!?

Don't mimic me if you lack the ability to do so.





I remembered the words of Mafuyu. My shoulders slumped unwillingly, and I retracted my palms off the door. If compared to the sublime techniques of Mafuyu, no one would possess skills within the acceptable range, regardless of who he is. It was especially so for me, since I gave up on guitar just after three months of playing it.

Can't be helped. It is a classroom that I was using without any prior permission - since it is quite alluring to be in an environment where I can listen to my favorite CDs at full blast without the need of wearing full-sized headphones; however, that is also all there is to it. I won't feel particularly troubled without it.

Just as I turned around and was about to make my way back to the main building—

"Young man, you're giving up already?"

A voice suddenly came from behind me.

I jumped in shock, and quickly turned my head backwards. What came to my eyes was the sight of a girl in her uniform, who was half kneeling right above the door - the low roof of the music classroom. She was wearing a huge, fearless grin. I could not move an inch, and could only look at her motionlessly.

..... W-Who's that person?

She had a set of pretty facial features, with eyes that were giving off a horrifyingly sharp gaze. She was just like a female cat that had escaped from an exceptionally well-to-do environment where she was raised in, like Egypt or some other royal families. I took a look at the color of her lapel pin, and confirmed she's a second year student.





"Are you gonna run away looking all crestfallen right after you had received a lesson from her? You'll become a true defeatist like this, you know?"

"Urm, well....." My numb legs could finally move - I moved backwards a little
".....what are you talking about?"

That girl then hummed a song. It's Ray Charles' <[Born to Lose](#)>.

"Born to lose. Don't you think this song exists just for you?"

"We are all born to lose. Isn't that how it is all along?" No wait, why am I answering her? I should run away. Things are not looking good. I better not get close to people like her.

She gave a hearty laugh.

"So young man, you're actually quite good with your retorts, aye? I feel slightly relieved. Why don't you draw out your weapon? Your country is being ravaged by the enemy."

Thud thud She said that as she knocked her heels against the door of the practice room. Why must I allow myself to be criticized by you like that? Then again, who the heck are you?

"Mafuyu should have played it to you just now. Chopin's <Étude Op. 10, No. 12> — <Revolutionary Étude>.







She said that with her index finger outstretched. I nodded with a "Mmm", and then I suddenly remembered something—

I was wearing full-sized headphones, right? How did she know?

That violent smile of hers could have caused even an elephant to faint.

"I can hear all the revolutionary songs of this world."

She nimbly jumped off from the rooftop, and that long hair of hers that was braided behind her floated in the air like the tail feathers of a majestic wild beast. She made a silent landing between me and the door, then straightened herself immediately.

"I wish to make Mafuyu my comrade. Therefore, young man, I am in need of your help. Please assist me."

No, stop, I really have no idea what the heck you are talking about—

"My name's Kagurazaka Kyouko."

Kagurazaka. I'd heard that name somewhere before. I began to search my memories.

Oh right, Chiaki mentioned that name to me before.

Kagurazaka-senpai stretched out her hand towards me.

"The Folk Music Research Club welcomes you in as a member."





Chapter 6

Funeral, Meeting, Funds



*Because, Senpai is the sort of person.....
who will definitely get her hands
on whatever she wants.*





"So you're saying, you bumped into Kagurazaka-senpai?"

The following morning, Chiaki stared at my face and asked me that question while we were in the classroom.

"Oh, yeah." I replied in an annoyed tone, "Though I think it was more of her waiting for me, than me bumping into her."

"Then..... are you joining the club?"

"Why would I!?"

"Because, Senpai is the sort of person..... who will definitely get her hands on whatever she wants."

Kagurazaka-senpai said the exact same frightening thing to me yesterday at the courtyard in front of the practice classroom, with her index finger pointing towards me. "If it is something that I want, I'll do anything in order to get it, by fair means or foul. It does not matter if it is Ebisawa Mafuyu, this room, or you."

After she said that to me, Chopin's funeral march sonata came from the practice classroom, and it so happened to be at the part of the final movement where the whirlwinds are raging through the cemetery - for a brief moment, I felt like dying.

Stop reminding me of those horrible things! Despite that, Chiaki caused those scary memories to resurface in my mind.

"I heard..... that she had always wanted a guitar which cost a million yen. As a result, she went to work for the music store where the guitar was at, and she even managed to grab hold of the shopkeeper's weak..... urm, she became close friends with the shopkeeper, and ended up getting the guitar for free."





"What the heck are the police for!"

"Since Senpai can get that guitar into her hands, Nao should be an instant kill for her."

So you mean I'm not even worth a million yen?

"To be in the same club as that sort of person - I really don't get what's going on in your head"

"But Kagurazaka-senpai is really cool!"

Hmm..... she may look cool if I am looking at her from a distance of two kilometers away.

"It isn't that bad to marry Senpai, right?"

"Alright, go ahead! But since Japan does not recognize same-sex marriage, go to Canada to get married instead! You know, Canada!" And don't ever come back!

"But both Senpai and I don't know how to cook. Why doesn't Nao come along as well?"

"The heck does it have to do with me!"

As I said that to Chiaki, the backdoor of the classroom opened, and Mafuyu stepped into the classroom. The preparatory bell just so happened to ring at the same time, as though it was reminding everyone that the place they were in is a classroom. She stared at me from the sides of her eyes, then proceeded to take her seat silently. At that instance, I stood up irritably and walked out of the classroom.





A series of footsteps could be heard from behind me.

"What's with you?" Chiaki chased up to me.

"I'm going to the toilet! Don't follow me."

"I heard from Senpai..... that you were defeated by Ebisawa?"

I stopped in my tracks. The bell which signaled the start of the class rang, and the students that had gathered in the corridors were swallowed by their classrooms. In the end, the only people left there were Chiaki and I.

"You can't quite consider that a defeat."

"Didn't she say..... that those who don't play musical instruments are not allowed to get close to the room..... and then you ran away?"

"If you think you can provoke me by saying those sort of things, then you are dead wrong! Don't underestimate my lack of drive!" Having heard those words coming out of my mouth, I couldn't help but pity myself.

"Nao knows how to play the guitar, right?"

"You can't count that as me knowing how to play." And the most important thing is..... I had thrown away the guitar I used back then, so I currently do not possess any guitar.

"It's fine if you practice it all over again! Senpai is very good at that, so you can ask her to teach you."





"If so, why don't you ask Senpai to directly invite Ebisawa into the band? She found out that Ebisawa is really good with the guitar, and wants to acquire that practice room along the way to use it as the clubroom, right?"

I don't think all those things have anything to do with me at all! I just hope they can just leave me alone.

Chiaki became quiet all of the sudden..... shit, that look of hers suggested that she was on the brink of crying and smacking me at the same time. But why? Did I say something to make her angry?

"..... Do you not know why Senpai is inviting you? Do you really think you are just a supplementary item of Ebisawa?"

Chiaki's words sounded as though she was squeezing them out by force.

"..... I. Don't. Know!"

I couldn't help but cower, and I took a few steps back as well. My back slammed against the wall of the corridor.

"Nao, you huge idiot! On your funeral, I'll say 'Nao's life was really boring!'"

With that said, Chiaki dashed back into the classroom.

I walked into the toilet with a heavy heart, and sat on the toilet cover. What's with that!

It would be great if I knew how to play the guitar, but..... if only I could squeeze out some motivation in me after hearing Mafuyu playing the guitar. I sat on top of the toilet bowl with my arms hugging my knees, and the sound of the bell came. I moved





not an inch..... it was the first time I skipped lessons..... and it had only been a month since the start of school - isn't it a little too early for that? That's my very first step on the route to become an utterly useless high school student!

In the end, I obediently went back to class during the second period. I am a person who gives up halfway through anyway, and I do not have the guts to step into an arcade. Moreover, third and fourth period is physical education - the teacher will be scary to face if I skip his lessons.

Halfway into lunch break, I walked towards the old music building, thinking that I should just remove all my stuff from there. Just as I stepped into the courtyard, I could hear the sounds of the guitar, and it felt like those sounds were blending up my brain directly. So that lass plays the guitar during lunch breaks too? Sigh, I thought to myself that I should just come another time. Just as I was about to head back, my sight was attracted by something that was placed next to the door of the room. That was..... a rubbish bag to contain trash that cannot be burned. What exactly is it?

I got close to the rubbish bag, and as I peeked inside, a burst of anger lit up from within my heart. Inside the bag were a huge amount of CDs — The Beatles; The Doors; Jimi Hendrix; The Clash - all of them are from my important collection! How dare that girl do this! I cranked open the door forcibly, and slammed the door open. The sound of the guitar began assaulting me, but then it disappeared just as quickly.

"..... Didn't I say already, that you're not to enter as you please!"

Mafuyu was sitting on the cushion on the desk and hugging her guitar. Her eyebrows were standing as she said that, but I was not about to retreat just yet.





I lifted the rubbish bag and protested angrily, "What are you doing?"

"The cabinet's too small, so I just took them out of the room."

"Who do you think these CDs belong to?"

"If they weren't yours, I wouldn't have tossed them out!"

I was so furious to the point where I could not come up with a reply. What's with all that!

"Oi, since you are playing the guitar, you should respect the great pioneers of the rock genre!" And you should respect my private property too!

"I do not listen to rock or whatever, nor do I know anything about them. These things are an eyesore and a waste of space, so take them back quickly!"

Mafuyu pushed the dumbfounded me out of the room and closed the door. What flowed into my ears next was Beethoven's <[Piano Sonata No. 12 in A-flat Major](#)>. Yet another funeral march!? That must be deliberate, right!? Just then, a fast-talking melody suddenly appeared in my mind - I ignored the funeral march for the moment, and concentrated my thoughts..... Chuck Berry!

<[Roll over Beethoven](#)>.

She dare say they are a waste of space? But she has never listened to them before! I have sacrificed half of my boring life listening to rock, and yet she's belittling them? I originally wanted to hammer the door of the classroom in frustration, but I thought otherwise in the end. There were better things I should be doing with my hands.

I hugged the rubbish bag as I headed back to my classroom. As I stacked the CDs on





my desk one by one, I started to think of ways I could beat Mafuyu up..... though of course, I was not really planning to punch her. The guys of the class came over: "You setting up a booth with all these CDs?" "All of them are western music." I was not paying much attention to them, despite them saying a lot of things.

What should I do.....? how should I teach her a lesson? It's decided, I shall let her have a look at the greatness of rock. However, I can't just toss the CDs to her forcefully, so—

I finally managed to locate Chuck Berry's album from the huge stacks of CDs. After slotting the CD into my discman, I stuffed the earphones into my ears.

The afternoon lessons of that day were spent listening to his songs.

I dashed back home after school, but I forgot to open the door gently, and as such the CDs in the house came crashing down onto me like a landslide. I stacked the CDs back nicely, then removed my shoes and walked into the corridor. From the living room came the works of Bruckner.

"Tetsurou, I've something to discuss with you!"

I opened the doors of the living room. Tetsurou was sitting on the sofa with the laptop resting on his knees, and he was typing out his article at great speed. He was banging hard on the keyboard - the laptop should be a goner soon.

From the speakers came the battering of the timpani, and Tetsurou typed on the keyboard with a *darararara* along with the tempo of the music - seemed like he was oblivious to the fact that I was already back home. As such, I switched off the music without mercy. Tetsurou slid down from the sofa.





"My son, what have you done? The thing that irritates me the most is when the symphony is cut off at the third movement - didn't I tell you that before?"

"As a middle-aged man who has had the third movement of his life interrupted, do you think you have the right to be saying that?"

"Whoa, my lil' Nao, where on earth did you learn those dirty retorts from? Daddy feels really sad....." I read them from your damn critiques!

"Alright, you should occasionally listen to what I have to say, okay? Stop lying there, sit down properly— don't do a seiza on the laptop! Do you want to crush it?"

After a roar of anger and a round of scoldings, I finally made Tetsurou sit in a position in which he could listen to me.

"Do you have anything to discuss with me?"

"Yup. I am calling for a family meeting."

"What's wrong? I currently do not have any intention of remarrying! But if it is with a girl like Chiaki, I may consider it."

"Stop with your daydreaming, you criminal! There won't be a second person in this world who is interested in marrying you! And what I wanted to discuss is not about that either!"

"What do you want to buy then?"

Tetsurou's tone became serious all of a sudden, and that caused me to get tongue-tied for a while due to my shock.





"There's something you want, right?"

"Urm..... yeah."

I sat on the sofa after calming myself down.

I am naturally in charge of the finances of our household, but that does not mean I can spend them as I please. I'll have to do a family meeting should I want to buy something expensive.

"I..... want a guitar."

"Isn't there one in the house?"

"You broke it back when you swung it about during the baseball match! Don't you remember!?"

For a person like him who does not treasure his musical instruments, is he even qualified to be a music critic.....?

"..... Doing it for a girl?"

Tetsuro asked that suddenly.

"Eh? W-What?"

"There can only be one reason for a guy to want a guitar all of a sudden. It is so that he can be popular with the girls!"

"What's with that bullshit? Apologize to all the guitarists in the world now!"





"I'll be casting a rejecting vote if you do not admit to it honestly." I could say nothing. Why is he such a pain in the ass!?

"How much do you think a guitar cost? It will cost at least fifty to sixty thousand yen for you to get a decent one, right? You only have about twenty thousand yen which you are free to use, isn't that right?"

"Why are you so damn clear about things like these?"

I gave a pout, and sank myself into the sofa.

"Why don't you earn some cash for yourself! Just write a few articles for me."

Tetsurou pushed the laptop on the table towards my direction.

"No..... I don't wanna do those things again." I pushed the laptop back. I had helped Tetsurou with some of his articles back when the deadlines were approaching. I originally thought it was impossible for the articles written by a middle school student to be published on an official music magazine, but little did I expect the editor to actually use them. It's probably due to Tetsurou editing them a little or something? Speaking of which, is that magazine really alright? Since then, my articles were published on magazines or on the CD covers frequently, and Tetsurou would pass on the royalties of the particular articles.

Even so, the cash earned from the articles written doesn't translate into my pocket money fully. Tetsurou said that thirty percent would be mine, while seventy percent will be incorporated into the family expenses. I tried protesting once by saying, "Why can't I use the full amount of cash that I earned?", and he would always reply with, "Because that's the same for me!" I can't argue against that. As a result, I have to hold a family meeting if I want to buy things that are out of my budget.





In other words, there will be no need for me to hold family meetings like this if I write more articles under Tetsurou's name. Then again, what should I do about the music magazine that has not once realized they are publishing articles written by a middle school student.....? Also, I want to purchase the guitar right now so that I can practice with it, but it will be at least two months before I can receive the royalties for my articles.

"The responses of the articles you had written were all rather good. You have indeed inherited my skills - how amazing! It just so happens I have only managed to write two lines since this morning, so help me out a little!"

Please don't say things like me inheriting your skills. I'll never help you write articles again!

"If you don't wish to help, you'll have to admit that you are buying the guitar so that you can be popular with the girls! If not, I won't agree to you buying it."

"Why do you have to be so insistent on that!"

"Because you had once started learning the guitar, but you gave up on it immediately."

I hugged the cushions, and fell silent. Tetsurou always hits the nail on the head once in a while amid all his jokes - I think that must be a very bad habit of his.

"It's true, but....."

"That's why, if a guy is doing it so that he can be popular with the girls, then there will be no problem at all! Just admit it. And this time, you must have the resolve such that if you give up halfway, you will not be able to get a girlfriend for the rest





of your life!"

Those words of his sounded quite stupid, but they were somehow extremely convincing as well. I took a brief moment to think about what he said in silence. For girls, huh — all of this was indeed started by Mafuyu, but it's more of a case where I want to teach her a lesson.....?

"..... Fine. I want to play the guitar so that I can be popular with the girls. Just cast your vote of agreement already!"

"Whoa, to be hearing such a stupid line from the mouth of lil' Nao - Daddy feels really sad~"

"Tetsurou, you are in no position to be saying that!"

I raged and threw the cushion at Tetsurou, but he unexpectedly grabbed the laptop and used it as a shield against my attack.

"Just joking! Remember to write my name down when you make the payments, or else they can't wire the bill to me."

My anger subsided after I tossed the newspapers and a half-eaten banana at Tetsurou. I went back to my room, and sorted out my thoughts while lying in bed.

I have never been to a proper musical instrument store before. They do put up some guitars on display at music CD stores, but I have no intention of getting a half-assed one from there. However, it feels strangely uneasy if you want me to deliberately look for a musical instrument store on the streets. Also, if possible, I want to get a guitar that is cheaper.





After thinking on it for a long while, my phone rang - it's Chiaki's phone number. Should I start the conversation by talking about me wanting to buy a guitar, she will definitely make me join the Folk-whatever club, so I'll just skip that for now.

"— Nao? It's a little too early for you to be home, you coward."

"How's that cowardly? Right, there's..... something I'd like your help with."

"A request? What's wrong? I can listen, but the price of me helping you will be joining our club."

"No way. Look, do you know any decent musical instrument stores?"

"Musical instrument store? Why?"

"To buy an instrument, obviously. I want to buy a guitar."

I regretted it a little, but I still told her the reason. As expected, she insisted on getting to the bottom of the matter,

"Why, why? Did you dream of someone? Eric Clapton?"

I'm not you! And also, Clapton's not dead yet!

"Could it be..... the things Ebisawa said to you?"

I was speechless for a moment.

"Ah! Silence. I'm right~"





"..... It's not that—"

"Ehh, Nao and Ebisawa—"

The both of us swallowed back the words halfway through our sentences at about the same time. A moment of silence followed. I could hear the announcement of the arrival of the train from her side of the phone - she probably made the call at the train station while on her way back or something? Chiaki finally said,

"Right, since I'm about to head home now, let's go together?"

"Urm..... you don't have to. Just tell me the place, and I'll go there by myself."

"Ah, it's fine. I am a regular there, so it will be cheaper if we go together."

"Thanks, but....."

"Oh! Here comes the train. See you there at the station."

She hung the phone before I could say what was on my mind. For some unknown reason, her voice sounded strangely hoarse. I felt slightly uneasy, but I still took out fifty thousand yen from the envelope that contains the money for the family expenses and put them in my wallet, before stepping out of the house. Prior to me mounting my bicycle, I placed my hand at the area of my heart, and confirmed it once again.....

It's still hot. That was not just a moment of impulse.

To get to the musical instrument store which Chiaki showed me, one will have to exit through the northern entrance of the train station, then head downwards via the





bridge till you hit the flight of stairs at the very end. After walking down the stairs, the store is located right at the intersection point of the shopping street and the slightly deserted residential area. It's sandwiched right in the middle of two large buildings - looks a little like the spine of a thin book. A signboard with the words 'Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store' hangs above its entrance. The shop is rather narrow, and there are guitars that hung by the two walls at the sides from the floors right up to the ceiling - that made the shop looked quite intimidating. The music played in the store was heavy metal of Northern Europe, which further adds on to the sense of intimidation.

Chiaki said to me before entering the store, "I am a regular here, so if you try your best to haggle, you'll definitely get a cheap and satisfactory price." I do not have much experience in haggling though, so I was not feeling too confident about it.

"But, why did you decide to play the guitar again? You were still very unmotivated this morning."

So she still asked in the end.

"Hmm— I just feel like playing all of a sudden."

"Do you think I met you only yesterday? You're not the sort of person who does things on a whim, but..... whatever. Hello~"

Chiaki grabbed my hand and walked into the store. Even the floors are filled with guitars supported by display stands. I strolled past those guitars and walked inwards. Finally, we found the counter amid the heaps of CDs and scores - for some strange reason, a sense of nostalgia hit me.

"Is the shopkeeper around?"





As Chiaki said that, a man walked out from the door located behind the counter. His messy hair was swept casually to his back. He should be young, but that tired look of his was quite a pitiful sight - it's as though he was a potato that was left on the side for three weeks after it was picked from the fields.

"Oh, it's Chiaki. Sorry, but I am quite busy here....."

"Well I'm sorry, but he is just your normal customer. This guy wants to get a guitar."

Just as Chiaki was about to pull me to the front of the shopkeeper, another person appeared at the door behind the counter.

"Shopkeeper! The strings in stock do not match up at all— mmm?"

"Eh? Senpai's working today?"

The me in between Chiaki and the counter was suddenly stunned. Kagurazaka-senpai was wearing the green apron of the store with its logo printed on it, and her hand was holding onto the logbook. How? Why is she here?

"Ah, Comrade Aihara. We are conducting a check on our inventory today, but there was a sudden lack of manpower. Speaking of which, we meet yet again, young man. How nice. Make up your mind quickly and join the club, yeah?"

"Urm..... ah, no..... ugh, why?"

Which reminded me, Chiaki did indeed mention that Senpai had worked at a musical instrument store to get her guitar..... So she's actually talking about this place? I should have thought of that..... Damn, I've been had! This is a conspiracy!

"Take your time! This is my store, so you don't have to hold back."





"Urm, it's my store....." The shopkeeper made a feeble protest.

"Shopkeeper's store is my store, right? Speaking of which, the numbers for Martin's Extra strings in the inventory do not match up at all. Did you place them somewhere else?"

"Ah, no, about that..... I won't know that if the Chief's not around!"

"Shopkeeper, you're totally useless....."

The shopkeeper looked like he was on the brink of tears.

"There's nothing I can do then. Young man, I have some time to spare, so I'll assist you with your shopping. Need anything?"

"Eh? W-Well, I am not here to buy anything." I wove a lie on the spot.

"He wants to buy a guitar. What do you recommend, Senpai?"

Chiaki interrupted. There was no point in me trying to lie my way through.

"Hmm. What's your budget, young man?"

"Well....."

"Oh, that's quite a huge sum! About fifty thousand yen."

"Don't take my wallet without my permission! And don't look at the contents either!"

I snatched my wallet back from Chiaki's hands.





"Fifty grand, huh..... you can only buy the cheap stuff here with the amount of cash you've got, but that would be a total waste of money."

"Don't say that....." the shopkeeper curled himself up as he said that. I had no idea what his name is, but I was beginning to pity him already.

"Young man, how about this then? We'll play a game of rock-scissors-paper. If you win, I'll sell you a guitar which is still slumbering in the warehouse and worth a hundred grand, at only half its price. If I win, I'll pick a guitar for you that is within your budget. How's that?"

"Hold on a second, Kyouko. How can you be so rash?" The shopkeeper was flustered.

"You said half-price, huh..... but is that fine?"

"No worries. It's clearly stated in the first chapter of Das Kapital: people sell their labouring-power to a buyer, not to satisfy the personal needs of the buyer, but to augment the buyer's capital."

"I don't quite get that....."

"To put it in simple terms, it means that most of the instruments here are sold at an exorbitant price, so they'll still be earning a profit even if I sell it to you at half its price."

"Kyouko....." the shopkeeper was close to tears.

"Shopkeeper's too irritating, so let's have our game outside. Young man, are you gonna accept my challenge or not?"





Kagurazaka-senpai grabbed my hand and pulled me outside of the store.

Though it was really pitiful for the shopkeeper, what Kagurazaka-senpai said made sense too. Or rather, it's a little too good to be true, since I stand to lose nothing.

"If the price of selling me the guitar cheaply is me joining the club, then I am heading back."

"There is no need for me to impose any conditions, yeah? Moreover, I don't think I'll ever lose to a born loser like you." Damn, she's really blunt.

"Alright, I get it. You'll be selling me a decent guitar regardless of the outcome, right? You won't be giving me defective goods or something?"

"Of course! I swear upon the name and reputation of the store!"

"Well..... alright."

"Ready? I'll give you a handicap."

Kagurazaka-senpai flashed a smile of satisfaction, and showed something that was pinched in between her index and middle finger. That's..... a guitar pick. Eh? Index and middle finger?

That means she won't be throwing scissors? No wait..... is that a trap? She's misleading me so as to lure me into a trap? "Rock— Scissors— Paper!" Along with the voice of Senpai, I threw out rock immediately.

Senpai's fingers expanded outwards to show paper - the pick slipped off her hand and fell onto the ground.





".....Young man, you're quite the honest man."

She gently patted my head. That's too sly! Actually, rather than saying that Senpai was sly, should I be blaming myself for easily falling into that trap of hers? As Senpai put a smile of victory on her face, I could see the shopkeeper behind Senpai heaving a sigh of relief.

"Well then..... I'll be heading to the warehouse to find the best choice that can fit your budget."

I calmed myself down a little, and squatted down on the spot. Chiaki came to my side and said,

"Nao is really weak huh."

"Shut up....."

"You lost the moment you agreed to the challenge."

I lifted my head, and after seeing Senpai taking a metallic grey guitar out from the warehouse, I finally understood what Chiaki meant.

"This Aria Pro II costs fifty-four thousand and six hundred yen, including tax. Well, it's exactly fifty grand if I round it down for you."

"Urm..... there's only four strings?"

"Hmm? Don't you know? This is a bass. It has two less strings compared to a normal guitar, and its pitch is an octave lower."

"No, I know that much. But why are you selling me a bass?"





I'm here to buy a guitar!

"Bass is part of the guitar family, right?"

"Urm, well, but—"

Chiaki placed her hand on my shoulder and said,

"Because the Folk Music Research Club lacks a bassist - that's how it is. You understand now?"

It took me two seconds to process that, before I realized in shock - I had fallen into her trap. That girl's motive all along was to be able to choose the guitar that I will be buying', and thus she gave the promise that I'll be able to get a guitar regardless of the outcome. The idiot who did not see through her ploy..... was me.

"W-Wait....."

"I am not interested in the words of a loser. Need a receipt?"

Kagurazaka-senpai flashed a smile as she said that. So she actually has a cute side to her as well—

"I never thought of playing the bass....."

"Well, you don't know how to play the guitar in general, right?"

My weak protest was quickly rejected by Senpai.

"Also, you want to issue a challenge at Ebisawa Mafuyu with a guitar, right?"





"Ugh....."

I was speechless for a brief moment.

"That girl can play Chopin and Liszt with just a single guitar. Young man, based on your current skills, there is absolutely no chance of you beating her with a guitar!"

It's not really a challenge or anything, just—

"However, you can win if you use a bass."

Kagurazaka-senpai shoved the heavy bass into my arms—

"I'll make victory yours."





Chapter 7

Towel, Insecticide, Sealing Tape



.....*Move.*





Compared to the electric guitar, the obvious advantage that the electric bass has is that you can barely hear anything coming from it if you don't plug it into an electrical source.

I bought the bass under Kagurazaka-senpai's persuasions, and brought it to class the very next day. I was instantly surrounded by my classmates. "Just play something, anything." Despite everyone urging me to play, I still gave the excuse, "But this is a bass, so it can't play any sounds!" and escaped. That wouldn't have worked if it was a guitar, so it's great that I had gotten myself a bass - with that thought in mind I could also console myself slightly for being played by the hands of Senpai.

"But why did you want a bass?"

A guy asked me something that I hadn't given any thought to.

"Ah, I've been thinking about it for a while. There's no real need for it, right?"

"Hey critic, you better explain it in simple terms."

"Don't call me a critic!" I took the bass back from the hands of my classmate, and placed it back into its cover. Actually, there's no way of explaining it all to them properly through words alone, but for the sake of the reputation of all the bassists in the world, I would have to come up with something.

"The few of you, sit over there."

"Yes, Prof Nao."

"Please do not use musical terminologies during your explanation."

Ugh, they had actually thought of everything prior to my speech. The few guys sat in





seiza around my seat, so I couldn't say anything wrong at a time like this. What to do? I licked my lips and thought of how I should start my explanation.

"..... Well then, let's start by recalling Retiree's face."

"Why?"

"Don't ask. Just do as I say."

A few of the guys closed their eyes, while the others stared into the ceiling. As he looks like a carbon copy of Mito Koumon, it is really easy to recall our tutor's face.

"Well next, try removing the goatee off his face. Done?"

"..... Right, done."

"Ah, that looks like Enari Kazuki when he was still young." [TLNote: 江成 和己, Japanese actor/host/comedian.]

"Enari is still young, alright?"

"Right right. Next, imagine Retiree without hair."

"Prof Nao, is there any meaning to this? Is this some sort of psychological test or something?"

"You'll know soon enough. How is it? Can you guys imagine it?"

"I can, but isn't Retiree's hair quite robust?"

"Compared to the goatee, it is still easier to remove his hair."





"And here's the last step. Remove the contours of his face, and imagine how he looks like."

Everyone's face was showing an expression like: "Eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't understand!"

"What does contours mean? The ears and stuff?"

"No, not that. It's removing the shape of his face. Imagine his eyes, nose and mouth popping out of a blank surface. Yeah, imagine that."

My classmates moaned sounds of "Hmm, hmm....." one after another. Some of them were pressing their fingers against their temples, while others were pulling their hair out.

"..... Can't, it's impossible. It's pointless if you remove the contours of his face!"

"No matter how hard I try, that round head of his will always appear in my mind."

"Try harder. You are always declaring proudly about how 'In my mind, I am able to remove the swimsuits worn by those beautiful gravure idols, regardless of who they are! ', right?"

Urm, you guys don't have to try that hard, you know?

They struggled for about two minutes before giving up. With that, I made my conclusion,





"So, if you apply the analogy of trying to erase the contours to a musical sense, the bass is like the contours of a face to me. Understand now?"

My audience was still looking very confused.

"It's just like how you guys can imagine the songs being played even without the guitars and the other instruments playing, but you can't imagine the song without the bass. As such, I can't quite explain very well why the bass is that important to me."

"I see....."

"Strange. It feels like I understand what he is trying to say, but it feels like I don't as well."

So do you guys get it or not? Then again, it will be disturbing if you guys do, because I was just spouting nonsense.

"But Prof Nao's really impressive. You have the potential to succeed the arts of your father."

"There's no way I'll be inheriting that!" Why must I allow myself to be told that by my classmates?

And with that, the preparatory bell rang. At the same time, the backdoor of the class - which is the door close to the right-back of my desk - opened.

Mafuyu stood by the door. Her line of sight first landed on my desk which was occupied by several of the guys, and then it shifted to the guitar cover in my arms. Her face cringed suddenly.





"..... Move."

A soft and cold word from Mafuyu was enough to cause the guys who were listening to my nonsense to move away from her path..... Oi oi, don't come to my desk, just go back to your seats already!

"Prof Nao....." One of the guys brought his face right next to mine, and whispered, "Is that it? Is the reason you picked up the bass because of Ebisawa?"

"Eh? W-What?" My voice became rather strange.

"You've been going to the courtyard frequently these days, right?"

"I see, so he'll be able to get close to her with that bass of his? That's quite smart of you, Prof!"

The guys stole peeks at Mafuyu's face. Don't gossip when you guys are that close to her!

Due to her hostile attitude, ever since the second day of her transfer here, nearly all the girls in the class have become her enemies. However, none of the guys seems to mind, and they continue to worry about her. The ones to show her the way when we were moving to another classroom, or to lend her their textbooks when she forgot to bring them - it was all done by the guys.

The guys who are always gathering around my desk are probably all doing it for the same reason? Guys are really stupid.

"Oh right, Ebisawa....."

One of the brave fellas turned around and spoke to Mafuyu. Mafuyu shifted her gaze





from her textbook to his face, and slowly said, "Please do not call me by my surname."

"Then— Mafuyu....."

"Don't call me by my name either. It's disgusting."

"Mafuyu called me disgusting..... My sole reason for living has been extinguished."

"Don't worry, your face is not as disgusting as you think."

"Right, my face. Wait, what are you implying?"

Move somewhere else if you guys wanna do manzai. Speaking of which, she did mention it before on her very first day here, but does she really hate her surname that much? I had always thought she was just lying due to the circumstances back then. But why? Did someone bully her in the past and give her the nickname 'Ebimayo' or something? [TLNote: Manzai, traditional style of stand-up comedy in Japanese culture (for those who do not read Onii-ai here). Just like Ebichiri, Ebimayo's a parody of her name, which means mayonnaise prawns.]

"So Ebisawa plays in a band too? Will your piano teacher be mad at you for playing the guitar?"

Just as he was talking to her with an unyielding spirit, the side profile of Mafuyu froze.

"Then again, you are really good at managing your time, since you can practice two different instruments at once."

"She should be practicing at the same time, I guess? Since the pieces are the same."





"How is that possible!"

Mafuyu shifted her sight back to the textbook. However, I noticed that her gaze was slightly blanked out.

"How did..... you people know?" As she was speaking with her head hanging low, the guys gradually quieted down at the same time.

"Urm..... Well....."

"You've been practicing in the courtyard after school, right? We can hear you all the time."

"Ah, it's really famous! Everyone knows about it."

Mafuyu suddenly stood up. Her lips were trembling, and her face was turning green.

"I could be heard..... this entire time?"

Oh, shit. She didn't know? As I turned sullen in brace of what may happen, I softly interrupted,

"Well..... I didn't tell you this, but the sound-proofing of that classroom isn't perfect. The sounds will escape from the gaps of the door."

Mafuyu's face became ghostly white in an instant, and then it turned red. Her lips were trembling non-stop.

I hugged my head and lie on my desk in anticipation of her incoming fist, but all I got was the sounds of footsteps running away from me, followed by the sound of the





door closing.

An uncomfortable silence shrouded the whole Third Class of First Year.

I lifted my head. Everyone pretended they didn't know anything, but their gazes were saying that I was responsible for all of that.

"..... Nao, what are you waiting for? Chase her!"

The guy who had lost his reason to live because Mafuyu found him disgusting, was saying that to me coldly.

"Why me?"

"Because you are in charge of Mafuyu!" Class-rep Terada said that for some unknown reason, and the girls around her nodded their heads in unison with a "Mhmm!". Wait, I'm in charge? What's with that?

"Get moving, or else the lessons will start! Hurry!"

I had no idea what they were planning, but there's something in this world known as the atmosphere of the situation, which is something that is hard to resist. I was driven by it as well, and stood up from my seat.

When I exited the classroom, I nearly bumped into a panting Chiaki as she ran into me.

"What are you doing? I saw Ebisawa not too long ago....."

"Where did she go?"





"Eh? Ah, hmm, she was just walking down the stairs— Nao? Wait! Nao, where are you going?"

The preparatory bell rang at about the same time I pushed Chiaka aside to run away from the classroom.

Mafuyu had locked herself in the special classroom in the courtyard. Though the door was shut tight and there were no sounds coming from inside, I knew it the moment I entered the courtyard - the padlock hanging on the door was opened.

I stood before the old music building, and began to sort out my thoughts for a while. What am I doing? I went along with what my classmates wanted and came out to find Mafuyu, but what should I do? Should I apologize to her? What exactly did I do wrong?

I should just head back to the classroom like that, and tell my classmates, "I don't know where she went?" and let things be as it is. However, my legs couldn't move.

Soon, the second preparatory bell rang, I'm surely late for classes now. Forget it, I might as well skip first period! It shouldn't be a big deal to miss a lesson or two occasionally. Moreover, there were things that I'd like to say to Mafuyu as well. I grabbed onto the handle, and pressed it diagonally downwards with force.

Mafuyu had stacked three cushions on the table, and she was sitting on it with her hands hugging her knees. Even when I walked into the classroom, all she did was lift her face up from her knees.

"It's a waste for you to be using the cushions like that. I brought three of those cushions here so that you can sleep on them if you lay them out on the desk side by





side. I'm not joking, so don't stack them up together like that."

Mafuyu did not change her posture much - she lifted herself slightly to pick out two cushions with her left hand, before throwing them at my face. I threw one of the cushions back, and placed the other on the floor so that I could sit on it.

"What are you here for?"

Mafuyu asked with a hoarse voice.

"I came here because I want to skip the lessons, but I never expect someone else to be here. Whoa, what a coincidence - though I am slightly troubled by this."

"Liar."

How do you know I'm lying? Show me proof! You know, proof! But you're right - I'm lying.

"Why..... didn't you tell me?"

Mafuyu stared at the floor and asked in a whisper. I turned my head backwards to take a glance at the gaps of the door, which resulted in the improper sound-proofing of the room.

"Well, it's because you never asked!"

I was hit by an incoming cushion yet again. Why are you angry at things like that?

"There's nothing bad about the sound going out anyway. It's not like you are doing something to be ashamed of."





"You're wrong."

Mafuyu hugged her knees next to her chest tightly, and curled herself up in a corner of the desk. I can't communicate with her. What should I do?

"You had released CDs of you playing the piano, but you're not willing to let others listen to you playing the guitar? Isn't that really strange?"

"What do you know?"

Mafuyu threw a question that fell softly between us.

All of a sudden— a surge of anger swelled up from within me.

"How would I know!" I moved my sight away from Mafuyu. If I don't do that, I don't know what Mafuyu would do should she finish her supply of cushions which she uses to throw at me. "It's because you won't say anything, isn't it? Just honestly say whatever is troubling you, because I don't know how to read minds!"

It was the same back when we first met, and it happened again during the first day of her transfer. Mafuyu said nothing, leaving me to wonder if I should be a busybody and worry about her. However, all that I got was her contemptuous looks, or her complaining about me.

"— If I tell you, will you help me?"

I lifted my head in fright, and stared at Mafuyu. Those teary eyes of hers looked like the water from rivers that flowed into the sea - their colors were dull and gloomy.

"If I tell you everything that is troubling me, will you do something for me? If I want you to swim to America, will you swim there for me? If I want you to chop off your





right hand and give it to me, will you really chop it off for me? If I want you to die, will you die for me?"

I was speechless. All I felt was a cold chill around me. The feeling was like I was trying to peek into an abyss during a dark night when the moon was not around, and seeing something that should not be seen from the surface of the waters.

"If you can't do that, then don't speak as you please."

"Urm..... do you really want me to do those things for you?"

Mafuyu shook her head. Seemed like she had secretly cried a little.

"No."

"If..... you don't try saying it out loud, then how will anyone know? It's just telling someone about it. There's nothing to lose."

"Then make me go back in time, back to when I first started playing the piano."

"I'm not god, so how could I possibly do that!"

Which means— there must be something that is troubling her. Why does she hate the piano that much?

And also.....

"How about this then - please stop following me. You are an eyesore."

I am not following you! This is the only thing that I must make her understand.





"I've said it many times already, I've been using this place since the beginning. The person who barged into this place would be you, right? So I'm not following you."

I glanced at the far corner of the room. Her plain Stratocaster was placed on the stand over there.

I stood up, opened the locker, and took out a towel that had been used for quite a long time already.

"Look here, there are gaps by the sides of the door, right? You'll have to stuff it up with this towel. It won't be perfect, but you can more or less achieve better sound-proofing this way. And also this....."

I took a broom and dustpan from the locker and showed it to her.

"Clean up this place properly. Can't you see how dirty it is along the walls and on the floor? It took me quite a bit of effort to clean this place up to its current state. Remember this: I'm here to get my classroom back. There's no way I'll allow a young guitarist like you, who hasn't even heard of rock before, to continue with that arrogant attitude of yours any longer!"

I said all those haughty words in the spur of the moment, and I regretted it a little almost immediately. Mafuyu stared at me in a dumbfounded state, with her eyes still filled with tears. Not long after, she took in a deep breath, and said,

"..... So that's the reason you brought your bass to school?"

She was actually crying like a kid not too long ago, so what's with that annoying expression of hers? Can't I bring my bass here?

"Do you think you can win just by changing to a bass? Idiot!"







"Say as you please. I can't play that well in my current state, but I'll definitely catch up to you soon enough. Well then, let us settle it once and for all with this room as the prize!"

As I said that, I grabbed the broom and pointed its handle towards Mafuyu. I said it! Mafuyu seemed like she could no longer speak a word - she was just standing there stiffly with her eyes opened wide. I interpreted that as her flinching at my words, instead of her being dumbfounded by my actions.

After placing the broom and the dustpan back into the locker, I took out a spraying can and placed it on the desk. Upon seeing the spraying can, Mafuyu tilted her head cluelessly.

"..... Insecticide?"

"Yeah. You can find some centipedes in the room occasionally, though it is quite rare to see cockroaches these days."

Not long after I had left the classroom, I could hear the sound of the door opening in a fluster behind me. I turned my head around, and saw Mafuyu dashing out of the room with a pale white face.

"..... What now! I already left as you have requested, so just stay in there properly. You'll be considered late if you are to head back to the classroom right now anyway—"

"W-W-Why didn't you tell me about this from the beginning?"

That face of hers which was on the brink of tears really made her look like a kid.





"Why? Because you didn't ask!" My answer was the same as before. "You've been in there all this time, right? It should be fine."

"Idiot!"

My upper arm was repeatedly slapped by her many times. What a troublesome lass.

In the end, we returned to the classroom after first period ended. As Mafuyu was grabbing onto my arms with an expression close to tears, I could only admit defeat. I spent roughly an hour in the practice room killing all the insects that I could find, as well as sealing up all possible gaps where the insects can get through with sealing tape.

I didn't think there was much of a point though. Things like centipedes and stuff can easily squeeze through an opening that's only two millimeters wide, right?

"Ah, the Princess is back."

"So you two really came back together huh....."

I felt slightly intimidated when everyone looked at us as we stepped into the classroom. Wait..... princess?

Class-rep Terada walked over, leaned herself against the desk, and said,

"After a round of discussion, the class has decided that we will be calling you 'Princess' from today onward."





Mafuyu's face turned ghostly white initially, but it soon became red. I had always felt that despite her not willing to speak much, one can easily know what she was thinking from the change in her expressions.

"..... W-Why?"

"You don't like it regardless of whether we address you by your name or your surname, right? It's very inconvenient for us to talk to you like that."

"S-So that's the reason....."

A girl next to the Class-rep said deliberately, "If you kneel down and apologize, we won't call you by such an embarrassing name."

"..... No way."

"Oh, I see. Well then, please take care of us from now on, Princess."

"It's your turn to do the duties tomorrow, Princess. Therefore, you must get here earlier, instead of the usual where you are always nearly late."

Ah, she's about to cry yet again. What's with all that - are they bullying a newcomer? But Mafuyu had only herself to blame for her predicament, so I didn't find her pitiful at all. Then again, what's with the huge difference in the attitudes with the young Japanese these days?

"Ah, if there is anything that the Princess needs, you can just ask Nao." That cold sentence from Class-rep Terada instantly sealed my fate without my prior approval. I nearly fell off my chair when I heard that.

"Why me?"





"Nao, it's like this."

The guy sitting diagonally in front of me explained,

"We always call a prince or princess 'Your Highness', right? Do you know why?"

"I don't..... and what's the link between these two things?"

"It means, 'we are the people who are below them and serving them' - like that. As it is rude to speak directly to the royals, we can only speak to their servants instead."

"Ohhh—" "I learned yet another thing today." Those moronic guys around me became excited.

"Which means, the servant we are talking about is you!"

"Me? Why?" Despite my protesting by slamming my fists on the table repeatedly, no one was paying any attention to me as the decision was passed by the class in overwhelming numbers, and it was too powerful for me to reject it. I looked in the direction of my only possible savior - Chiaki. However, all she did was look at Mafuyu and me suspiciously. She then made a weird face before turning around to face the lecture stand.





Chapter 8

Princess, Revolutionist



*However, Ebisawa Mafuyu
didn't listen to a single word I said.*





I grabbed my bass and escaped from the classroom immediately after school, and headed towards the roof. Once I got there, I saw a girl in her uniform sitting on the wired fence looking towards the sky. Her hair was caressed by the winds, and she seemed to be in a pretty good mood. It was Kagurazaka-senpai.

"Isn't that a little too slow, young man? The after-school bell had already finish."

"No, it's Senpai who's too early....."

We were still having our lessons, so how could she get here before the bell was done ringing?

"The melody of the time signal of the factory opposite of us will overlap with the chimes of our school at this time, which results in a coincidental and intriguing polyphony. I really hope you could listen to it, young man."

"Haa." Speaking of which, it's a little too dangerous for you to be sitting on such a high place, right?

Senpai jumped down from the fence and landed right in front of me.

"Have you decided to join our club?"

"Well....." I removed the bass that was slinging on my shoulders and leaned it against the fence. I was slightly hesitant with my words, "I'll need your help in bass, but as for joining the band....."

"Why?" Senpai arched her beautifully shaped brows.

"No, it's just because I wish to get back that classroom so I can listen to my CDs. I'm not playing the bass for Senpai's sake."





"But you came here quickly according to my instructions."

"It's simply because I'll be needing Senpai's help if I want to teach Mafuyu a proper lesson."

"So by wanting me to teach you, you are referring to me teaching you how to play the bass first. You are using me, just like how I am using you. Right?"

The way she put it was rather blunt, but I still nodded my head honestly. In order to win against Mafuyu, I couldn't care less about my image.

A smile appeared on Senpai's face.

"Mmm, I see. You no longer have the expression of a loser."

Her smile was not as theatrical as usual - instead, it was an extremely natural smile. I was shocked.

"Isn't this fine? I had already predicted that you would be joining us anyway. So let us begin!"

Senpai squatted down and took out a bunch of stuff from the backpack on the floor: a mini-amplifier with batteries in it, the cables for the amplifier, as well as replacement strings for the bass.

"..... But, why do we need to practice on the roof?"

"Young man, what do you think is the first step in training for the basics of bass?"

She directed the question at me as she took out the strings from a bag and unwound





them.

"Hmm— isn't it practicing the finger crab walk?"

It's a sort of repetitive practice on the basics. The player sets a fixed tempo, and begins pressing on the fret in order by using the index finger to the little finger, then playing out each scale in order. As the left hand will move horizontally inwards little by little, some people call it the finger crab walk. Sounds noobish, but it is the basics of guitar playing. However, Senpai shook her head.

"There's another thing that needs to be done before that. It's the reason why I called you up to the roof."

Senpai pulled the string tightly by its ends.

"I've made a tightrope from here to the roof of the opposite dormitory with a string. You shall walk on it to the other side of the building."

I was stunned. I nearly dropped the bass that I was taking out from its casing.

"..... Eh?"

"You can't be a bassist if you can't entrust your life to the strings. I'll be here praying for your safety. You'll probably die if you fall off, so you better prepare yourself mentally first."

"No, no no no, what the heck are you talking about?"

"My my," Senpai shrugged.

"It is necessary for to undergo special training that puts your life at risk for you to





become a bassist. You mean you don't know? Even the most famous bassists of Japan had all undergone all sorts of training with their lives on the line. Take for example, they'd knock their head repeatedly with a tin can, or expose themselves to the blazing fire of a gas explosion..... and so on."

"So the famous bassists of Japan whom you are referring to..... are?"

"The deceased Ikariya Chosuke." [TLNote: Wiki page [here](#)]

"The Drifters is a comedy group, ain't it!?" I slammed the bass casing against the ground. [TLNote: It's the [Japanese band/comedy group](#), and not the English one.]

"The Drifters is a band as well! They were the opening act for The Beatles' concert. That's really rude of you, young man."

"I know that, so stop trying to change the subject!"

"The thing about the tightrope is obviously a joke. The first thing you should do is change the strings of the bass. Since the instrument had been in the store for quite a while, the elasticity of the strings will gradually slacken."

T-This person is just.....

I didn't think there was any point in saying anything, so I just changed the four strings in silence.

"The real reason for me calling you up to the roof, is that!"

Kagurazaka-senpai pressed against the fence and pointed downwards. I could understand what Senpai was referring to from the sounds of the guitar that were entering my ears, without the need to look at what she was pointing to. The





classroom that Mafuyu practices her guitar in was right beneath us.

Then again, I had taught her how to soundproof the room with the towel, so why could I still hear the sounds of her guitar? The carefree melody was Ravels' <[Pavane for a Dead Princess](#)>. Is it due to the shock of our classmates addressing her as 'Princess'?

"That was seven days ago."

Kagurazaka-senpai leaned her back on the fence, and looked into the sky.

"I was skipping classes from the very first period, and stayed here till school was over, while listening to the sounds of the streets."

What's this person in school for?

"Then, the sun gradually began to set, and just when it felt like it was about to rain, came the sound of that guitar. It was Book II of Bach's <[The Well-Tempered Clavier](#)>. However, she skipped the fugues and played only the preludes. I was so pissed, I didn't notice that it was already raining - I sat down and continued listening."

"You'll catch a cold like that....."

"All she played were the preludes, right up to [No. 24 in B minor](#) - it was sweet torture. Then I heard the door opening, and so I sneaked a peek towards the room, and saw a beautiful girl walking out of it. Her hair was of a clear maroon color - it was just like frozen maple syrup. That was enough for me to fall for her."

The bass slipped off my knees and fell on the ground.





"Urm..... Senpai?"

"Hmm?"

"But Mafuyu's a girl?"

"So what? I like beautiful things. In my eyes, gender does not matter. Why do you think I allowed Aihara Chiaki to join the band as our comrade? It's because she's cute."

"Please don't say such shocking things nonchalantly."

"In any case, I never expect her to be able to play the drums that well in less than a year."

"Chiaki would cry if she heard that from you."

"No problem. I'll tell Comrade Chiaki about my tastes unreservedly."

"So everyone really does think you're someone who will get her hands on whatever she wants?"

I was shocked speechless. I never thought she would be a person like that. I should just learn bass by myself - it's still not too late for me to turn back. I began to tune my bass while thinking of that.

"However, Ebisawa Mafuyu didn't listen to a single word I said. Also, upon my detailed observations, for some unknown reason, you're the only person in this school who can converse with her."

I jumped in shock and lifted my head.





What appeared before me was that destructively cute smile of Senpai's, which she had only used once that week.

"Therefore, young man, I need your strength."

I had no idea why, but I could not look straight into Senpai's eyes - all I could do was shift my gaze back to the bass in my hands. That was the first time someone said that to me in my entire life. No, wait a second, calm down and think about it properly. Senpai said herself that I am just a pawn to be used by her.

"So your actual plan is to gather a bunch of cute girls, right? It's not really about the band."

I voiced out the doubt within me, but all Kagurazaka-senpai did was tilt her head and look at me with her eyes blinking repeatedly.

All these conversations I had with her weren't just hallucinations of mine, right? That thought suddenly flashed past my mind.

"Young man, do you know the reason why humans are born into this world?"

What's with the sudden question? How would I possibly know!

"The answer's simple. Humans are born into this world for love and revolution."

Suddenly, the wind breezed past us, lifting up Senpai's long hair. I nearly fell over despite only feeling a faint gust of wind on my shoulders. Why is she saying all that? Do I have some misunderstanding on what life is all about? Those questions appeared in my mind for a very brief moment.





"Lev Trotsky..... you probably don't know about him, do you?" [TLNote: Or better known as [Leon Trotsky](#)]

I no longer had the strength to shake my head.

"He's the second to last revolutionist! He fled to Mexico after losing to his political comrade, Joseph Stalin, in a political battle. He died before witnessing the start of the revolution of the world. However, his misfortune was not because Stalin was not by his side....."

Senpai took my bass away from my hands blankly, and plugged it into the amplifier.

"His misfortune was that Paul McCartney was not by his side. The last revolutionist, John Lennon - he's lucky to have had Paul McCartney next to him."

Senpai suppressed her overwhelming emotions, and began to pick the strings with her nails. A series of intense and out-of-tune sounds blared out from the amplifiers loudly, which stimulated my ears. I couldn't understand at all - how can those thick strings of the bass produce such a high-pitched sound? She was playing the prelude of The Beatles' <[Revolution](#)>. It's the song of revolution written by John Lennon, and it's a song that is widely misunderstood.

"Therefore, love, revolution and music are inseparable from my life. The strength to push for the never-ending revolution; the strength to find the Paul who belongs only to me; and the strength to convert these thoughts into songs that I sing - there is no difference between the three. Young man, are you satisfied with the answer I gave you?"

Is your answer even directed towards my question.....?

"Ah, I am totally clueless about what you're trying to say."





Just as I was about to voice out some of my thoughts, Senpai knitted her brows and shook her head while mumbling, "My, my."

"Can't help it then. To put it in simple terms that you can understand, it's like this: aside from gathering a bunch of cute girls, I am serious about forming a band as well."

"Then just say that right from the start!" I banged the casing yet again.

"It's better for you to be a little more poetic."

"You keep treating others as idiots as well, don't you, Senpai? And stop that proud look of yours, because I'm not praising you."

"Young man, your reactions are quite interesting. Come here."

Senpai was smiling bashfully. Come here? Be slightly more polite, will you!

"Well then, let us modify the bass. I am quite troubled by your knack of going off topic." Me? It's my fault? Just as I was about to speak, Senpai suddenly returned the bass to me.

"We'll have to create the sound before you practice. See, I've brought all sorts of pickups here. You have your tools ready, right?"

Senpai took out a few guitar parts from her backpack. A pickup is something that captures the vibration of the strings. By changing these parts, there will be a significant change to the tone of the instrument. Other modifications include changing the internal wiring and etc, and the most extreme case is to punch holes onto the guitar itself.





"..... You mean, we're going to modify the bass right now?"

"That Aria Pro II of yours is a cheap bass, but I specially chose it in consideration to the timbre of Ebisawa Mafuyu's Stratocaster. However, that is not enough. This bass is unable to create the tones that offer a perfect response to her guitar."

Senpai pointed beneath the fence. A series of glamorous fast strumming of the guitar played by Mafuyu came from that direction. I see, so that's the reason for summoning me to the roof?

Senpai and I repeatedly pondered on how to modify the bass, and it was something really interesting. Just so happens that I am good at it as well.

"..... The sounds of your bass are already comparable to the bass of Greg Lake's."

After two long hours, Kagurazaka-senpai took the completed bass and said that with praise, amid the heaps of wood shavings, metal bits, and pieces of snapped strings. I was slightly embarrassed by that.

"Why don't you work on my Les Paul as well? I want to make its tone slightly richer."

"No way, I don't have the guts to work on that sort of high-end guitar."

Senpai cracked a laugh, and began to clear up the tools and rubbish.

"Try to connect your bass to the amplifiers as much as possible when you are practicing. It's so that you can feel it with your body, and remember the sounds that





will be the same as what you will be playing in the actual performance."

I nodded my head, and once again plugged my bass into the mini-amplifier. The clarity of the bass was totally different from how it was when I first bought it. This was to match up against those clean timbres of Mafuyu's, which are played with a mechanical precision. If you ask me, I am quite confident about my modifications as well.

Since the moment Senpai unreasonably forced me to buy this bass, I had never quite felt that the instrument was mine. However, as of now, it really felt like I the bass was covered in my sweat from the past ten years of my usage - I could use it comfortably. It's my partner that I've created from scratch. I could finally begin practicing.

"Of course, I won't be making you practice on some basic things repeatedly either. That is something necessary, but you can just practice that on your own at home. It may be quite sudden, but I'd like you to play a song for me right now."

Senpai placed a hand-written score right before me.

"Do you know this song?"

I nodded in reply. There was no title on the score, but I knew straight away after a glance.

"I won't deny that the melodies of a bass aren't that attention-grabbing. There are almost no songs that people can recognize purely by its bass alone. There's only one exception, which is this. Therefore, I think all bassists should start with this song, and end with this song as well."

The song is Ben E. King's <[Stand by Me](#)>. Bum, bum, badabum, bum..... that's the





bass rhythm — it's true, two verses is all it takes to revive the tune in your memory.

"Then pace yourself to the metronome and play the song! Keep playing till night has come and the stars are up, alright?"

After she was done with singing the lyrics, Senpai gave a wave before opening the door and leaving. I heaved a sigh, sat down on the floor and picked up the guitar.

Though Senpai is always giving me plenty of surprises, I had never once thought she would make me play a song that quickly.

Hey! Ain't you gonna Stand by Me?

After an hour into my practice, something suddenly felt out of place. Initially, I didn't know what that feeling was.

It was till I lifted my fingers off the strings and stopped the metronome, that I had finally realized—

I could no longer hear the sound of Mafuyu's guitar. I lifted my head and shot a glance at the clock on the wall of the walkway - it's almost six. Mafuyu will usually play till it's about time for school to end, so she should not be home yet. Perhaps she went to the toilet or something?

I increased the tempo of the metronome slightly, and started playing from the beginning again. This time, I hummed the lyrics as I played.

However, the rhythm of the lyrics is different from the rhythm of the bass, thus making it difficult for me to play. My fingers stopped playing yet again, due to that





out-of-place feeling I had felt earlier.

The door of the roof should be closed, and yet it was slightly ajar. I leaned my bass against the fence, and walked to the door. Upon opening the door, I saw a frightened Mafuyu standing on the other side of it. She took a step back but missed the steps, and nearly fell backwards down the stairs. As her hands were waving wildly in the air, I quickly grabbed her by her shoulders and pulled her back up.

"..... What are you doing here?"

After much difficulty in steadying herself, Mafuyu brushed my arms off her shoulders. She turned her head away quickly and answered,

"It feels really noisy up here."

I glanced at the bass behind her in slight shock. She heard that? But I didn't make much sound to begin with.

"Why are you practicing at a place like this?" Mafuyu glared at me. She seemed to be rather unhappy.

"Didn't I teach you the method to soundproof the room using the towel?"

"If I did that, I wouldn't be able to escape from the room fast enough if something appeared in the room."

If something appeared in the room?

"It's..... when something..... appeared in the room..... or things like that."

Mafuyu lowered her head while speaking vaguely.





"Ah, things like centipedes or cockroaches?"

"Wa! Wa!" Mafuyu cupped both of her ears and stomped on my foot a few times. It hurts! What the heck are you doing!

She turned the situation into something rather stupid, so all I could do was head back to my bass. For some unknown reason, Mafuyu was following me.

"Urm..... What?"

"It's out of tune."

Mafuyu puffed her cheeks and pointed at my bass rather unhappily.

"Eh?"

"The third string is too flat. I was really uncomfortable when I heard it just now. You mean you didn't notice?" I checked my tuner, and it was indeed slightly out of tune. She could hear it three floors beneath me? She's that good?

"I'll borrow it."

Just as I was trying to tune it, Mafuyu suddenly snatched my bass away from me. She quickly gave the tuning pegs a few turns to tune the instrument, then passed the bass back to me.

"Thanks for helping me tune it! I'll pay you ten yen each time you do that, so please help me out in the future."

"Idiot."





I suddenly remembered something, and began playing <Stand By Me>.

"What's this song? I heard it somewhere before," Mafuyu asked. Impressive, it's exactly like what Senpai said. As a girl who has been carefully nurtured under the influence of classical music, this is probably the only song that Mafuyu can recognize just by the bass alone.

"It's a song called <Stand By Me>."

"..... What is the song about?"

"What's it about huh? Hmm..... It's a story about how a person was walking along the railway, when he suddenly found a corpse next to it."

Mafuyu knitted her brows.

"..... Are you talking nonsense again?"

"No, I'm not lying." Though that is the summary of the movie with the same name, and not the lyrics of the song. [TLNote: Talking about the [film 'Stand by Me'](#).]

Not long after, Mafuyu sat next to the door of the roof, and listened to my raw bass techniques. Then again, how long are you planning to stay around here? It's really tough for me to play when you're around, so please go back already? Perhaps it was because of Mafuyu staring at me, I had played the notes wrong quite a few times.

"Are you happy?"

Mafuyu suddenly mumbled those words out. I stopped my hands from playing, and lifted my head.





"..... Are you happy playing the bass?"

I had no idea how to answer that sudden question from her.

"Hmm, it's not too bad. It's rather nice to be able to gradually play the songs that I like."

"Really?"

Mafuyu didn't seem the least interested. All she did was stare at the floor.

I asked her the same question, "You're not happy when you play the guitar?"

"Not the least bit."

"If you're not happy, why don't you stop playing then?"

"Why don't you just die?"

I gripped hard onto the neck of my bass, and took a deep breathe. Alright, it's fine, don't get angry. There will be no end to things if I am to take every single word of hers seriously. I have to be more mature than that.

"Since you're not happy, then why do you still coup yourself up in the practice room everyday to play the guitar? Just go home and play your piano already!"

"It's none of your business."

There's plenty to do with me! You've snatched my place of rest away from me, no?





"Then..... can you not lock the door with a padlock? You go straight home right after school on Fridays, right? Can you let me use the classroom on that day?"

"How did you know that I go straight home on Fridays? Pervert!"

That has nothing to do with me being a pervert or not. I can easily see that with my own eyes.

"No! Don't ever come close to me!"

Our conversation ended like that.

I continued practicing quietly, but Mafuyu had no intention of leaving. She was walking to-and-from the door, hesitating on whether she should head back downstairs. What's she doing?

"— Princess?"

Mafuyu jumped in shock, and turned around.

"Are you calling me that as well?"

"Then how do you want me to address you? Ebisawa?"

She shot a glance at me angrily.

"Mafuyu?"

This time, she shifted her gaze diagonally downwards, and nodded her head while biting her lips slightly. So she can more or less accept it if I call her by her own name? But it's quite difficult for me to address her that way!





"Just tell me straight if there is something you want to say. I told you that yesterday, right?"

"Why are you acting all high and mighty?"

Do you have any right to be saying that to me? However, just as I was about to stare back at her, Mafuyu looked somewhere else. It's as though she was saying something awkward - she murmured softly,

"..... There's something moving behind the cabinet with a buzzing sound."

Hmm? Ah..... so that's the reason she came here?

"Don't you have the insecticide?"

"I sprayed it into the room, before running out of there in a hurry."

Man, that's not the way you use insecticide! These aren't those boron insecticides where you smoke them to death.

"It won't work if you don't spray it at the insect directly!"

"You're asking me to do things like that?"

Mafuyu said that as she clenched her teeth with tears in the corners of her eyes, and her body was trembling slightly. Is that the way to ask a favor from someone? Then again, if I leave her alone, then Mafuyu will never use that room again, which means that victory will be mine?

"If you don't like it either way, how about returning the room to me like a mature





lady?"

"You scumbag!" Mafuyu said to me while holding back her tears, "Whatever, I get it. I'll do it myself."

Mafuyu slammed the door, and from the footsteps it sounded like she was walking downwards. Go ahead and try your best!

I continued playing <Stand by Me>.

Still, I was quite curious about how it ended, so I looked down through the fence.

Mafuyu was standing outside of the practice room rigidly with her left hand clenched into a fist. After staring at it for quite a while, she reached out for the handle of the door, but then she stopped almost immediately, as though all the strength in her body was drained out of her. She stood there motionlessly, and her back was trembling non-stop. As she looked really pitiful, I switched off the power of the amplifier, placed my bass down, and got myself up.

So that buzzing sound was not actually caused by an insect. After reaching the courtyard downstairs, I walked into the practice room. I tried shaking the cabinet, and something that was stuck to its back suddenly fell onto the floor with a *pa*. So it's actually the front cover of Iron Maiden's first album. The buzzing sounds were probably made by the rustling of the pages on the front cover, caused by the vibration of the cabinet due to the sounds of her guitar. [TLNote: [Iron Maiden](#)'s an English heavy metal band]

I originally thought I had lost the front cover of the album forever, and was thus really happy when I managed to get it back. I delightedly showed Mafuyu the cover which features the [grotesque image of a zombie](#) - needless to say, she sprayed the insecticide on my face while crying and yelling at the same time.





Chapter 9

Whale, Paganini, Fighters



Mmm—I lied to you.





"Since Ebisawa dislikes the guitar, why is she still playing it?"

Chiaki had plugged her portable music player into a set of mini-speakers, and was listening to the sarabande of <[English Suites](#)>. She asked that question while tapping her fingers onto her knees to the rhythm of the tune.

"She's so good with the piano. Even if she does play the guitar, all she plays are some piano pieces, right?"

"Well, that may not be all she knows about the guitar."

Kagurazaka-senpai had laid out a huge amount of scores on the concrete floor, and was carefully reading them all while answering Chiaki at the same time.

Since the Folk Music Research Club isn't an officially recognized club, activities are conducted mainly on the roof. I don't know if she is planning to rope me into the club slowly - even though I am not a member of the club, Senpai still asks me to head to the roof daily after school. As we were holding a team meeting, Chiaki was around as well.

"So, what are your thoughts after listening to Mafuyu's CDs?"

Yesterday, which was the fifth day since I started practicing according to the instructions given by Senpai, Senpai said to me,

"Gather all the pieces that Mafuyu has played as well as their scores, and bring them to school tomorrow. Since you live with a music critic, you should have the entire collection properly kept in your house, right?"

I do have the scores and the CDs in my house, but locating them was another matter altogether. I searched for the scores in Tetsurou's messy library almost the whole





night, which resulted in me being almost late for school this morning. Senpai seemed rather happy as she looked through the scores which I brought one by one. I knew Senpai was scanning through the scores as she listened to Mafuyu's music on the piano.

"So the pieces Ebisawa Mafuyu plays are centered around Bach. Even so, there's no way for her to play the fugue with the guitar - it's technically impossible, right?"

"Probably?" I nodded.

Fugue is derived from the term 'flee' in Italian. This style of composition began during the early days of modern music - the baroque era, and was pushed to perfection by Bach. It's a style that has various voices entering at different times, that chases an initial melody - therefore, some calls it 'fleeing tune' as well. [TLNote: Refer to Note 1 at the end.]

Which means that, since the guitar can basically play only a single melody, it is extremely difficult to reproduce the techniques of fugue.

"Therefore, if you are to challenge her, you'll have to do it through fugue huh....."

"I see..... Eh? What did you say?"

My hand stopped strumming the bass.

"The so called team meeting was for this?"

"What did you think it was then?" Senpai said in shock. "Young man, I think it is about time you are aware of this, but the difference in skill between that of yours against that of Ebisawa Mafuyu's, is akin to the difference of a white ant and a blue whale. It is impossible to win if we do not come up with a strategy."





"I do know that, but please be more gentle with your analogies, would you?"

"Then how about an apple against the Earth?" Chiaki joined in.

That's even worse!

"However, you can't challenge her with Bach. There will be no chance of victory if you do that," Senpai resumed the topic.

"Eh, wait a second, I'm gonna play classical music?"

Senpai lifted her sight off the scores, and she looked even more shocked now.

"But of course? How else do you plan to 'teach her a proper lesson'?"

"..... Urm, well....." To be honest, I never thought of that before.

"There's nothing concrete, but I guessed something along the lines of me playing some rock for her to listen to, so that she can be slightly impressed with me?"

"Do you think that someone who possesses such sublime guitar techniques would be shaken by what you have to offer under these circumstances? Firstly - and it will be really troublesome for me if you have forgotten this - I want to welcome Ebisawa Mafuyu into my Folk Music Club as my comrade. Which means, I want to welcome her to be a member of the band."

"Eh?"

And so?





"So we must be able to play the pieces together with Ebisawa, right?" As she flipped the scores on the floor, Chiaki continued, "It must be pieces that Ebisawa knows."

Kagurazaka-senpai patted Chiaki's head lovingly. I see, so that's the reason we will be using fugue huh. The pieces that Mafuyu loves, but isn't able to play by herself in her current state.

Which means, my bass was carefully modified so as to match up to the timbre of Mafuyu's guitar? Is that what she is implying? But wait..... eh? That means that me joining the club is part of Senpai's plans as well? So that is already a given in Senpai's mind? I did tell her clearly that all I want is that room, and I won't be joining the club.

"However, she may not fall for our instigation even if we are to carefully select one of Bach's fugue..... Moreover, even if we have successfully reached the battle, those last-minute skills of this young man will probably be incomparable to hers, and things will just end with that." Senpai bit on her lower lip and tossed the scores away. "Well, we may still have a way out if the young man can stay by my side and take up a year of my training, but that will take up too much time."

I don't want that sort of training either! It just feels like my life will never be the same again if I am to undergo that sort of training.

"..... Hey, Nao. Didn't Ebisawa say that she would be disappearing by June?"

Having heard that from Chiaki, I looked into the sky and began recounting. Actually, Mafuyu did say that in front of the whole class on the day she transferred to our school. As she did lots of unpleasant things later on, I had completely forgotten about it.

Those words — what exactly do they mean?





Senpai asked yet again, "Disappearing in June? She said nothing else aside from that?" Chiaki pressed her finger against her lower lip and thought for a moment, before shaking her head.

"I'll be gone in June, so please forget about me; that's all she said. What does that mean? She's transferring to another school? Could she be going to study in the high school affiliated to the College of Music?"

"That's bad then." Senpai crossed her arms and said, "If we can get her into the club, I can still tie her down by mesmerizing her with my charms. However, it will be troublesome should she disappear before that."

"Senpai, there's the Immorality Act, so you know you can't do anything that's overly crazy, right?"

"No worries, if it's me, I can do that without stripping, so I won't be infringing the Immorality Act."

What's with that eager look of yours?

"So..... young man, if you do not have the resolve to die for my romance and revolution..... Oh!"

Senpai suddenly switched off her discman.

"..... What's wrong?"

"Ebisawa Mafuyu's here."

I looked downwards through the fence. I managed to see her back with that maroon





long hair vanishing into the classroom of the old music building. I'm sure Senpai didn't see that, so how did she know Mafuyu was here? Is she a wild beast?

We laid our bodies low, and quietly waited for a while. Soon, we could hear the sounds of the guitar. Eh? What's this tune? I heard it somewhere before, but I can't remember. There's a hint of Liszt in its style.

"— It's Paganini."

Senpai said into my ears. I remembered.

Niccolò Paganini, a violinist who is known as the Devil due to his overly impressive techniques. He is a very talented composer too, but due to his distrusting nature, he hated releasing the scores of his compositions. So because of that, nearly all of his works are lost.

His violin concerto and capriccio, along with the piano etudes composed by Franz Liszt based on his capriccio, are probably the only works of his left in modern times.

What Mafuyu was playing was the etude composed by Liszt.

It felt like the bones in my body would creak from those intense vibratos should I listen on any longer. Chiaki was cringing as well. What an irritable performance.

"..... I see..... Paganini huh."

Senpai was muttering to herself yet again. I turned around to take a look, and saw her digging through Mafuyu's CDs with a serious expression. Her left hand was sifting through the scores as well. What's going on?

Finally, Senpai found a CD and a score.





"Found it."

"What's with those things?"

"Young man, can you lend me these?"

"Well, I'm fine with it....."

"Then I'll be heading home first. I have a song to compose."

"That song?"

"That's right, young man - Paganini. We'll do exactly what Paganini did. We can win with this."

Senpai's face was overflowing with some sort of energy, but I was completely confused. What does she mean? What Senpai is holding in her hands is not Paganini at all—

"Of course. The only person who can teach Beethoven a lesson is Beethoven. Right?"

Senpai flashed a cute wink, before walking towards the school building with the score and the CD. She's still the same as ever, saying things that no one can understand. The same thing Paganini did?

There's no way I could get it no matter how hard I tried, and so I placed my bass back onto my thigh.

"Senpai looks really happy—"





Chiaki was sending Senpai off with her gaze, and murmuring to herself in a daze. Well, that person looks happy all the time anyway.

"I never thought Senpai liked Nao that much."

"The one she likes is Mafuyu, not me. I am just the bridge that connects them together."

Chiaki narrowed her eyes and stared at me, as though she was dissatisfied with something.

"..... What?"

"Mmm— nothing."

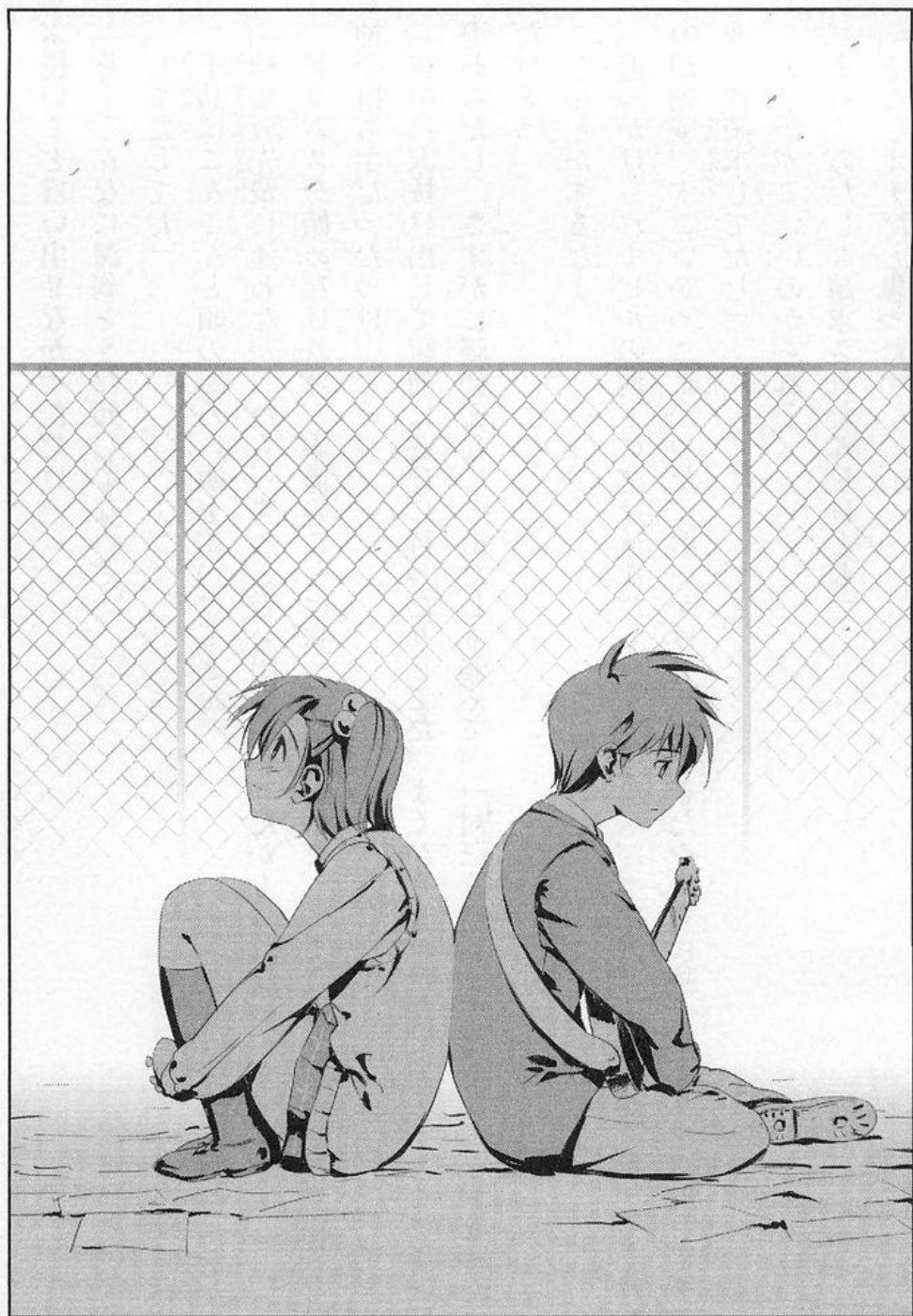
Chiaki suddenly stood up and sat down right behind me, with her back pressing against mine. I moved slightly forward in shock, but since she came leaning on me yet again, I could move no further.

"She said we're fighters."

Chiaki suddenly spoke.

"..... Fighters?"







"Yes. Haven't you heard? Folk Music Research Club is just a front to fool the world. We are actually a revolutionary army."

"Nope, not at all." A front to fool the world? Senpai actually managed to say that? Oh please!

"..... What was it again? She said something like, the Sixth International or the Vanguard Party or something."

Is that some sort of misleading students' movement of a certain unknown era? Also, what's with the sixth? Where's the fifth? [TLNote: Referring to [Forth International](#)]

"I really don't know which of her words are true, and which of those are meant as a joke."

"Perhaps all of her words are true?" Chiaki laughed, "But what if all of them are just a joke? Or rather, there's no way one can discern the truth from the jokes in her words, right?"

"Oh— I guess you can put it that way."

"Didn't I injure myself during the competition last summer? The doctor said back then that I can no longer practice Judo ever again."

"Isn't that something that only happened a month ago?"

"Mmm— I lied to you. Nao somehow seemed very worried, so I couldn't bring myself to say it immediately back then."

So even the words of the doctor was a lie? Seeing how she was acting all fine soon after her injury, I was totally relieved. Thinking back, I was really an idiot back then.





"I was really depressed, alright? Those expressions of yours said everything - you thought that my injuries were really serious. I couldn't bring myself to tell you that it was actually something that happened really long ago."

"I..... never thought it was something serious."

"Yes, you did."

Chiaki knocked the back of her head into mine.

"If not for meeting Kagurazaka-senpai, I may have kept it from you forever." She managed to give up judo because she has drums now - is that what she's trying to say? But is Chiaki actually that delicate?

"Back then, I frequently ran out of the house in the middle of the night, and roamed about the station by myself. Many people came to me looking for trouble. Since I was mistaken as a boy, plus the fact that I couldn't harness my strength due to my back injury, I was actually really weak. However, I could still take them on if it was not more than one on three."

There's no need for you to take on those sorts of things!

"I was chased by them, so I ran into the basement of a building. Then I realized it was a live house, and it was there where Senpai held them off for me. She's really cool - she actually took some drinks over, and asked them for the entrance fees."

..... That's cool?

"Ah, but she asked for my entrance fees too."





"Just as I thought."

"As I didn't have much cash on me, I could only pay using my body."

I wanted to tsukkomi her on that, but I gave up in the end. "So, what's the fighters thing about?" That term sounds like the grunts in the movies though.

"Right. Senpai said, that to start a revolution, she'd need at least 3 more people. The chairman, the treasurer, and an army commander or something. With Nao joining us, all that's left is Ebisawa."

"Hold on, I haven't joined the club yet, yeah?"

Suddenly, I could no longer feel Chiaki's back. I fell backwards onto the concrete floor, and my head knocked into it gently - the pain spread to my jaws.

"Ugh....."

As I opened my eyes, I saw Chiaki's upside-down face closing in on me. I gulped in shock.

"There's no reason not to join us, right? You've bought your bass too."

"That's because—"

Chiaki grabbed my head with both of her hands. I could no longer move even if I wanted to.

"..... Is it for Ebisawa?"

For Ebisawa — it's slightly different from what those words were implying, but I





nodded my head anyway.

"Why? Why are you doing that much for her? There shouldn't be much drive in you, no? Moreover, you've been practicing nonstop recently, and your techniques are getting better. I was quite surprised about you, you know?"

I won't know how to answer her if she asked me that one more time. 'It's to get back my personal practice room' - that sounds like an excuse no matter how you look at it.

I mean, if all I want is to be able to listen to my CDs leisurely after school, there should be other simpler methods to achieve that.

So is it for the reputation of rock? Or my pride? No matter how I try explaining it, there's something that doesn't feel quite right. But no matter what, I have to challenge her.

I thought quietly for a while. Chiaki then released me and stood up.

"How did you and Ebisawa know each other?"

Chiaki sat against my back again, and asked.

"Why are we talking about this?"

It's hard to explain what happened that day, so I had no desire to talk about that topic.

"I just told you how I met Senpai, so it's your turn to tell me."

I couldn't think of any good reason to rebut, and Chiaki was knocking her head into mine several times. I began telling her what happened as I recounted the incidents of that day. About the department store that's filled with rubbish at the ends of the





world, and how Mafuyu was playing the piano sonata by herself.

I left out only one thing — about how the junk actually made the sounds of an orchestra.

She probably would not have believed me — and somehow, I felt it would be better if I kept that a secret, even from someone like Chiaki.

"That place seems quite interesting. I want to visit it too."

"No, it's not fun at all."

The heaps of large-sized rubbish are like skeletons from some war, left to rot gradually as days goes by - among them, stood a piano. Everything's deadly quiet, and the world has ended for that place - Mafuyu is probably the only person who is able to bring life back into that place.

I tried to recall yet again, the melody of the piano sonata which Mafuyu played on that day. It's formed via a sequence of arpeggios, just like the gentle bobbing of the surface of the seas. Is that Debussy..... no wait, it's probably Prokofiev? I still can't recall the name of that tune.

Also, it somehow feels like that's something that I cannot touch. Mafuyu did say back then that she wanted me to erase that song from my memories.

If so, that song must hold a certain key. For Mafuyu, that is a song that leads to one of the secrets that she is holding.

It was till then that I realized I did not understand Mafuyu at all.

"In any case....."





Chiaki's voice suddenly appeared before me and pulled me back to reality.

Unknown to me, Chiaki was already squatting before me and staring into me.

"You are very concerned about Ebisawa, right?"

"Hmm..... mmm?" I replied vaguely, "Nah..... what? I don't get what you're talking about?"

"There's no need for you to play dumb at this point."

Chiaki showed a faint smile, and gently knocked my forehead once. She then stood up.

"Alright, I'll be heading back home as well. I wanted to ask if you need my help in your training, but I guess it doesn't matter."

Chiaki walked back into the building without even looking back. I was left alone on the broad empty roof, and the lonely melody of Mafuyu came from beneath my feet.

Why are all the girls around me such perplexing people? I shook my head, and picked up my bass once again.

I suddenly remembered how Mafuyu came barging onto the roof, and thus I began practicing after I was done tuning the instrument.

The next day, Mafuyu passed me a squarish light-grey thing from her bag after she came into the classroom. It's pretty well wrapped - what is it?





"This....."

"Eh? What?"

She shoved the thing into my hands. I looked at it from all sides several times.

"That thing., it's..... my fault. I bought this for you."

I had no idea what was going on. Mafuyu bought something for me? What sort of joke is that?

"But, you absolutely cannot open it here."

I nodded despite my brain being in a mess. However, those classmates of mine who don't listen to a single word others have to say, came leaning close to me excitedly as usual. One of the guys snatched the package away from my hands.

"What? A present from Princess? Oi oi, is this for real?"

"It's not a CD. Nao, can we open it?"

"Eh, ah, wait....."

The packaging was torn open before Mafuyu and I could even stop them. It's a CD. On its cover is a zombie with a blood-stained axe in its hands, and it was giving off a nasty grin. It's titled '[IRON MAIDEN Killers](#)'.

"Didn't I say not to open it!? Don't show it to me, it's disgusting!"

Mafuyu turned away, and her voiced sounded like she was close to tears.





"Mafuyu said I'm disgusting yet again. My sole hope of living is gone."

"Don't worry, she's not talking about you." "But this zombie looks slightly similar to you, don't you think?"

My classmates were saying some retarded things again. I snatched the CD back from them.

"Urm..... you bought the CD for me just because of the cover?"

I had thrown away the cover which I found behind the cabinet, and it was all thanks to Mafuyu spraying a load of the insecticide on it. Mafuyu nodded with her back still facing me, and murmured, "Hurry up and put it away."

It's just a cover, so why was she so concerned about it? I thought of Mafuyu, who was disgusted just by the image of the zombie. Then I thought of her going to the heavy metal section, and flipping through the CDs - all filled with covers of extreme designs and images - while desperately trying to locate the album of Iron Maiden hidden within. I no longer knew what I should say to her.

Moreover—

"What?"

Mafuyu noticed I had something to say. She shot a glance at me.

"Urm, no..... it's nothing."

"Say it!"





"Mmm..... It may be a little too much for me to be saying this, since you specially bought it for me, but this is actually their second album. The cover that you ruined is actually from their first album." I couldn't blame her for confusing things, since the styles of both covers are extremely similar. After hearing that, Mafuyu's face turned red immediately. Oh shit.

Bang - Mafuyu slammed her palms against her desk, and stood up.

"I'll go buy it right now."

"Nah, lessons are about to begin."

"I'll buy it!"

"It just so happens that my second album's in pretty bad shape, so I'm really grateful to you for buying this album for me." Just as I was consoling Mafuyu, the preparatory bells rang. And because our teacher came into class earlier than usual, Mafuyu finally removed the idea from her head. I really don't get girls at all!

*Note 1: Oh joy, tl;dr time. K, the Japs actually do the term fugue as フーガ (Fuuga). [Wiki said](#) that the English term "is derived from either the French word fugue or the **Italian fuga**", so that's where the derivation comes in. 遁走曲 (literally means fleeing tune) is another form of the term fugue in Japan, though it is hardly used in the book.*





Chapter 10

Firebird, Beyond the Sea, Medicine Bag



*But even then,
she is still tied down
by the fame of her father.*





Later in the night, I was practicing on my bass after having dinner by myself. Just then, came a loud sound of avalanching items from the direction of the main door.

"Oohhh..... It's the ultimate bliss to die while buried amid all this great music from different eras....."

At the door, was Tetsurou in his rare suit, buried within a heap of collapsed CDs. He was staring at the ceiling and murmuring to himself in a daze.

"Please save up enough for me to live a well-off life before you die."

Speaking of which, I do remember clearing up quite a bit, no? No matter how hard I try to arrange them, the CDs still stack up higher and higher - there's no stopping them. I complained as I dug Tetsurou out of the mess.

"After I die, you'll have to place Stravinsky's <[Firebird](#)> into my coffin. Don't go about playing <[Requiem Mass in D minor](#)> or something, just play <[St Matthew Passion](#)>! I'll then rewrite the record held by Jesus Christ, and revive myself within two days."

"There's no need for that, just go to hell and stay there! Didn't I say to call me if you were drinking?"

"Ah, mmmm. Been a long while since I met up with my fellow classmates from the College of Music..... Urgg....."

The great music of different eras as well as Tetsurou's only high-end suit were dirtied by his sour-smelling fluids. That fella was already half-dead due to his stupor.

"Ahhhh. I'll have to send this for cleaning."





After vomiting in the toilet, Tetsurou returned with a pale face. Even after seeing how dirty he had made his suit, he managed to say that as though it had nothing to do with him. There's only one thing that can make Tetsurou dress up properly, which is a concert. Due to the nature of his job, there are plenty of occasions where he needs to attend a concert, and yet that fella only has a single suit. What should I do with him? In any case, I'll fix him a cup of hot lemon juice to fix his stupor.

"Uuhhhh, I'm revitalized. I'm a really lucky guy. My wife ran away from me, but god has gifted me with a son who knows how to take care of me."

Oh Mum, why didn't you fight much harder for my custody?

"I've had enough of women. All five of my classmates are single, and three of them have already divorced once!"

Tetsurou was coming up with his own lyrics and singing along with the aria of <Rigoletto> — <[La donna è mobile](#)>. I covered his head with the rubbish bag to shut him up. Think about our neighbors, and stop disturbing them! [TLNote: 'La donna è mobile' is translated as 'Woman is fickle'.]

"It's the same for you with girls, yeah? You've already thrown away that guitar or whatever, right?"

"I'm still playing it! Stop treating me like an idiot!" I pointed to the bass on the sofa.

"But you suck at playing it, right?"

"Well, sorry for that!" That means the sound can still be heard from outside? I think it would be better for me not to connect my bass to the amplifier when I'm practicing at home in the future.





"Aww why? Is that girl that good? Ah, it's Ebisawa Mafuyu, right? You mentioned her before. She's a good girl, yeah. You know, there's a silly saying in our circles..... See, in the case of the covers for the albums of female musicians, the picture's taken from their side profile - and it's especially so for the pianists. If she's prettier, the image will be a slanted profile of her face; if she is gorgeous, they'll take the picture from the front. I've been in this job for fifteen years, and Mafuyu's the first I've seen who had her picture taken from bottoms up— Eh? What's wrong, lil' Nao? I've hit the spot?"

"Shut up."

I splashed Tetsurou's face with a cup of water.

"What the heck are you doing..... lil Nao's really cold these days. Could it be that you're hating on me?"

"Look, Tetsurou....."

"Mmm?"

"Do you hate the so called consumption tax?"

"Huh? Why that sudden question?"

"Just answer it."

"Mmm, if you ask me if I hate it or not..... I think it would be better without it, so maybe I hate it. However, since I've been paying consumption tax for so long already, I think I've already forgotten that sort of detestable feeling."

"Mmm, that's roughly how I feel about you."





"..... Can I cry?"

"Head outside if you wanna cry!"

Tetsurou clamped a bottle of whiskey beneath his armpit, and it looked as though he was really planning to go out. Thinking of how he may be a nuisance to the neighbors, I stopped him immediately. Act your age, and go to sleep already!

"But, I don't think there's a chance between you and Ebisawa Mafuyu. Because..... well, you do know you are the son of a music critic, and she knows that as well. I actually came back from Ebichiri's concert performance in Japan. I originally asked him to join us for a drink, but he said he'll be appearing on a live TV show, so it was expected that he would reject us. We did talk during the banquet though - seems like he'll be in Japan for this month, but he'll be travelling to a faraway place come June. Probably back to America."

"So I say, you're getting it wrong..... Eh?"

Ebichiri — Mafuyu's father is back in Japan?

He'll be returning to America in June. The June Mafuyu's referring to..... is that?

"..... Then what about Mafuyu? You heard anything related to her?"

"Hah?"

"Nothing. So..... she'll be following him back to America too?"

Somewhere around this time last year, Mafuyu would probably be with her father flying to multiple places all over Europe and America due to the world tour?





However, she couldn't have done something pointless like transferring to our school for a single month, right?

"She's probably not returning back to piano, I think. I just heard about it today as well. Seems like the critics there have written some really nasty stuff about her. She had even participated in a competition that is not related to Ebichiri, and obtained victory as well. But even then, she is still tied down by the fame of her father."

"Ah....."

I recalled that incident where Mafuyu was staring at me with full of animosity. 'The very existence of critics are troubles themselves, because they always write rubbish'. She did indeed say something along those lines before.

"Her playing styles do invite attacks though. Like how she was not lively enough; how it was too calm; how horrible her presentation of the parts were; how her music was like crawling insects; or how she was overly reliant on her techniques..... even I can think up of quite a bit of nasty critiques on the spot, and if I really want to, I can probably write about thirty pages on it. But it will be quite stupid of me if I were to really write them out - it's not like all the pieces you play will be considered good just because you played them all vibrantly."

"So that's the reason Mafuyu doesn't play the piano?"

"I don't think so. Well, it seems like they had written things about her private life even though it is not related to music, just because she is the daughter of Ebichiri. You see, her mother's a Hungarian, and they're divorced now."

"Ah..... So she really is a mixed blood."

I suddenly remembered the day when I fixed her recorder for her. Hungary.





"Ah— you mean you don't know about that? Well, we should stop talking about the topic. I feel like I'm a paparazzi who's hounding for some news."

Tetsurou popped open the whiskey bottle, and drank directly from it. I no longer had any strength in me to stop him.

Just when I was a middle-school student thinking of living my life leisurely back in Japan, Mafuyu was already on the other side of the seas under the scrutiny of the curious and hostile stares around her, and living a fearful life while grabbing her piano tightly. What sort of life is that? I can't imagine it at all.

However, it's back to the initial problem once again. If she has really given up on the piano, then why is she playing the guitar?

The next day, as I was walking into the classroom, my classmates were discussing the television program yesterday.

"Is the show live?"

"Yeah, seems like he's back in Japan already."

"An interview?"

"They're talking about things that I don't understand. It's not like I listen to classical music anyway."

"Do they look alike?"





"Not one bit. Princess probably takes after her mother?"

Just from those bits of conversation, I immediately knew they were talking about Ebichiri. I took a glance at Mafuyu's empty seat.

"The host asked about Princess as well."

"The father and daughter are not on good terms with each other, right?"

I've been thinking this whole time - you guys should know that Mafuyu is about to get here soon, and yet you people are still loudly gossiping about things related to her?

"Nao, your father's classmates with Ebichiri, right?"

"..... How did you know?"

"Maki said so! She also said back when Ebichiri was still teaching, your father was always flirting with the girls."

Miss Maki..... please do not exaggerate those stories and spread them out.

"What, so Nao really does know Princess beforehand."

"But from what I saw, Ebichiri kept trying to divert the topic whenever the host asked about his daughter. Do you know the reason for that?"

"Urm, look....."

I removed the bass from my shoulders, and leaned it against my desk. Then I mustered my determination and said,





"Stop asking about things related to her, alright?"

Everyone was looking at me with a surprised gaze. I pretended to organize my textbooks, and continued,

"Just leave her alone, okay? She's just like an injured wild kitten - if you guys get close to her, she may actually scratch you guys; but if you guys leave her alone, she won't be bothering you. That girl had her fair share of problems during the world tour in America and stuff, so—"

Just as I was saying all that, I noticed that the people around me had directed their gaze in a strange direction. I could feel a prickling sensation on my shoulder blades. I turned around, and saw Mafuyu standing at the door of the classroom. Perhaps she had inherited that from her Hungarian mother? There was a slight blush appearing beneath her fair skin. Her huge eyes were staring at me - it seems like those were not stares of anger, but rather, she was shocked.

"..... Ah, look, I don't....."

I wasn't sure myself if I was trying to cook up some excuse then.

"You sure know how to spread those words around."

She murmured, and made her way to her seat. Those around me had already fled in all directions.

"It's not what you're thinking."

"Please don't talk to me."





The voice of Mafuyu was just like a pair of scissors, snipping away the distance between us. I could only remain quiet. Those who were around me not too long ago were sending me flickering looks of apprehension.

Chiaki rushed into the classroom only some time after the bell had rung. As she walked past me and Mafuyu, she noticed the dangerous atmosphere as well.

"What's up?" She peeked at me, and then at Mafuyu. "Are you two quarreling again?"

"I have never quarreled with him before, so please don't use the term 'again'."

Mafuyu said that as she looked away.

Chiaki was about to say something, but I tugged her sleeves and pleaded her not to say anything.

Forget about talking, Mafuyu didn't even look in my direction once. She immediately ran out of the classroom right at the start of lunch break.

"She's angry....."

"Princess' angry....."

All the reproaching murmurs as well as the stares of my classmates had gathered on me. It was really my fault this time. I had no choice but to stand up and leave the classroom.

I walked to the courtyard, and reached the training room of the old music building.





There was no padlock hanging on the door, and the door was left ajar as well. I quietly sneaked a peek into the room, and saw no one inside. What's happening here?

I walked into the room, and saw a guitar connected to the amplifier, with the pick left randomly on the desk. Seemed like someone had run out of the room in a hurry after entering into here. Which means, it should be fine for me to wait here for her, right? I then realized I had not thought about how I should apologize to her. What's the reason for Mafuyu to be that angry towards me?

Just as I was sitting on the cushion on the desk and thinking of how I should apologize to her, I accidentally swept the pick onto the floor with a flick of my hands. That's probably the pick that Mafuyu uses. It was only until I picked it up that I realized - the shape of the pick was rather strange.

Typically speaking, picks are a thin piece of plastic shaped into a triangle or an onigiri. However, there's a plastic loop on both sides of the surface of the pic.

I tried slipping my thumb and index finger through the plastic loop, and they slid in the position just like how one should hold a normal pick. However, I had never seen this sort of pick before. I had seen finger picks or thumb picks that are secured onto each of the fingers before, but a pick with two loops—

"Don't touch that!"

A voice came from the direction of the door, which caused me to nearly drop the pick again. Mafuyu pushed the door open with her shoulders. I placed the pick back into its original position, and got off the desk.

"Urm, look..... I'm sorry."

I looked downwards, and noticed she was holding a small white plastic bag in her





left hand..... is that medicine?

"Are you feeling unwell somewhere?"

Mafuyu was surprised by my question, and said "It's nothing". She then stuffed the medicine bag and the pick beneath the cushion. So she just got back from the infirmary?

"What do you want?"

Mafuyu gave a sigh as she said that, which was quite unlike how she used to yell at me to scram. It's actually much more scarier for her to be behaving this way.

I was blunt with her, "I'm here to apologize to you." Just as I was thinking on what I should be saying next, Mafuyu spoke,

"Why? What are you apologizing for? Just tell everyone things about me as you please. I don't care the least bit."

"Look, I'll explain everything, so just listen to me," I said that while suppressing my anger. "Yesterday, Tetsurou - that's my father by the way - he came home in a drunken state, and told me gossips that he heard from the other critics. He said that some critics in America had written some really nasty things about you. However, he never went into details, so—"

"Then there is no reason for you to apologize to me!"

I could feel my face burning in an instant.

"Stop picking on my words."





"What, are you here to throw your anger at me?"

"That's not it, alright?" I swallowed my words, and tried my best to keep my emotions as calm as possible. "Okay, I get it. I'm here to apologize on behalf of all the critics in the world who only write rubbish."

My habit of talking nonsense had kicked in yet again. Mafuyu blinked her eyes in shock, which was then followed by an expression of surprise.

"But you're not a critic, right? Though I heard that your father is."

"I'm a critic too."

Mafuyu tilted her head. Her gaze was filled with confusion.

"It's true. I've helped Tetsurou write articles under his name about four to five times already, and those articles were actually published on music magazines. That's why, I should be qualified to apologize to you, right?"

Mafuyu bit on her lips. Not long after, she looked at the floor and shook her head,

"I don't get what you're trying to say. What are you talking about?"

She suddenly said that with a slightly trembling voice.

"Why? Why are you apologizing to me? I've done so many nasty things to you."

"So you actually realized that?"

"Idiot."





Mafuyu lifted her head. Her eyes were filled with the dull colors of the gloomy skies - it was the same as that day when I met her for the very first time. It was a damp feeling, as though a downpour was approaching.

"I don't care about those silly things. No matter how they write about me, or what they write about me, it doesn't matter. That's not it at all. I wasn't that..... wasn't that....."

I could faintly hear Mafuyu's choppy voice from afar, and I gradually found it difficult to breathe. I was thinking - just where exactly is she? This inconceivable girl with a dull violet aura surrounding her should be right in front of me - but in reality, how far away is she from me? Why..... can't my voice and hands reach her?

"Why do you care about me? It's the same as back then. Why did you help me? Please, don't care about me anymore. I'm about to disappear soon anyway."

Mafuyu leaned against her guitar and sat on the desk, with her face buried in her arms that were hugging her knees to her chest. There was a gloomy downpour, but the rain fell only on her body.

I walked out of the classroom, but I could still hear the faint sounds of the continuing downpour. However, the skies of May were irresponsibly bright, with only a cloud or two hanging above the outlines of the buildings.

I thought to myself — I must be forgetting something; I must be missing something important about Mafuyu. However, I had no idea what that is. Till then, I thought I was beginning to understand something, but those feelings were totally swallowed up by the imaginary clouds of rain at her side. I dragged my body which felt like it was drenched, and walked back towards the classroom.





Chapter 11

Desert, Heart, Kashmir



*Why didn't you come to
the roof for the past few days?*





Chiaki took the scores to my house three days later during the evening.

"Why didn't you come to the roof for the past few days? You returned home right after school today too! Senpai's really worried about you!"

As usual, the uniformed Chiaki climbed up the tree in the courtyard, and squeezed in through the window of my room. She said that as she shook a stack of handwritten scores in her hand.

"Mmm....."

I twirled the wires of my headphones and answered vaguely.

"Somehow, I don't feel too motivated these days."

"That's not something that can be said by someone who lacks any motivation to begin with."

I became even more depressed. I climbed into my bed, and pulled my blanket up over my head.

"Sorry, it's my bad."

Chiaki sat next to my pillow and pulled the blanket away from my face. She then asked,

"Did Ebisawa say something to you again?"

I did not reply to her, and instead covered my face with my pillow. Since the day I went over to apologize to Mafuyu, I had never once touched my bass. My brain was in a total mess.





"Hey, are you going to say things like you want to quit?"

"..... Maybe."

I had already prepared myself for Chiaki to punch or do a triangle choke on me, but instead she looked up at the ceiling, and said nothing for a long while.

"..... I thought we could finally start a band or something."

I heard her mumbling something. For a moment, I thought I was thinking too much into it. Just as I lifted my head to look at Chiaki's face, she pressed a score sheet into my face.

"Senpai spent so much effort changing that Beethoven's piece into the scores of a bass, all just for you!"

I stared at the dancing tadpoles on the five-line staff lazily.

"No, can't do. I can't possibly play this piece of music."

"That's because you didn't practice, right?"

Chiaki got it absolutely right, so I hid myself under the blanket, and laid on the bed. Suddenly, Chiaki pressed her whole body weight on the area near my waist, and began practicing drumming basics on my back. Crotchet, quaver, triplets, semiquaver..... she actually used her drum sticks to hit against my back along to the rhythms accurately.

"Chiaki, that hurts!"





"I know."

What's with the "I know"! What sort of answer is that! She continued drumming the rhythms on my back while maintaining them at a fixed tempo. Before long, my mind became lax.

"Everyone will feel hurt if they're hit directly in their heart."

I had no idea what she was talking about. Still, I began imagining the pain of my heart being drummed at. It's probably painful enough for the corpses to jump out of their graves in pain.

I don't know if Chiaki was getting more and more into it, but she began drumming some quavers slowly. Somehow, it felt like my head was a cymbal, while my right hand was a floor tom. Wait, stop - Miss Chiaki, that really hurts! Before long, the piece suddenly went into the chorus. She began lightly rapping semiquavers on my left shoulder in replacement as a snare drum.

"Chiaki, wait, that hurts! I said it hurts!"

I kept moving about beneath the blanket, but my opponent's a retired black belt in Judo, and she knew very well where to apply the force so as to make me immobile. In the end, I had to wait till she finished drumming the whole piece before I was freed from beneath her butt.

"Do you know what song that was?"

A naughty smile appeared on Chiaki's face, as she asked me that question after I had finally managed to get out of the blanket with much difficulty.

"Unicorn's <[Hige to Boin](#)>?" [TLNote: [Unicorn](#) is a jap rock band]





"Oh, you're quite sharp."

Though such cases are rare, but just like the how <Stand by Me> is for the bass, there are some songs that one can recognize instantly just by listening to the drums. Actually, this miracle might have happened purely because Chiaki and I had grown up listening to similar music since our days in kindergarten, before Unicorn disbanded.

"But sadly, the answer is <[Asia no Junshin](#)>."

"So you're just toying with me!?" To think I had just thought of it as a miracle - doesn't that make me an idiot?

"Not at all. We still have to do our best even if life is boring! I'll root for you, just a little."

With that, she took her shoes that she had placed on my desk, and jumped out of the window..... why can't you just leave through the main door?

I'm alone yet again. I sat on my bed, and picked up the scores left by Chiaki. The theme's really simple, and the tempo is quite slow as well - I think I can probably play it right off the bat. Up till the point where the second, third and forth voices are gradually overlapping, there is still no change in the difficulty of the part which I am supposed to play. However, the variation before that is much more complicated. As for the fugue, I actually have to play a melody that is as difficult as Mafuyu's, right till the very end. That's just impossible no matter how you look at it! I tossed the scores aside, laid down, and stared at the ceiling for a while. My back was still a little sore from the drumming that Chiaki gave me.

Things like how the pieces are too difficult, or how I have no motivation at all - they





are all excuses. I knew that perfectly well. Therefore, Chiaki might know it just as well. I was just ashamed of myself. I don't understand the situation about Mafuyu at all, and yet I was challenging her to a fight enthusiastically. To get back the classroom so that I can kill time after school - just for something as stupid as that? What an idiot I was. But that's even more reason why I can't give up at a point like this, or else I'll be an even bigger idiot than I already am.

I quickly took the scores, and went to the living room to take out my bass from its casing.

Just as I was tuning the instrument, the string suddenly snapped into two. Feels like it's telling me that I can't possibly do it.

I laid on the sofa and planned to just sleep it off, but my back where Chiaki had drummed on began to hurt again. And so, I stuffed the scores into the casing, then lifted it up onto my back and walked out of the main door.

The skies were already growing dark when I reached Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store. From a gap which was about as wide as the width of a pencil, I could see all sorts of guitars that were displayed in the shop, which were glowing under the display lights. Somehow, the scene felt so nostalgic, I almost teared from my eyes. I only went to the shop once, so why did I feel that way?

Kagurazaka-senpai was tending the store alone, and there were no customers in there. She's on the other side of the counter. Using a piece of yellow cloth, she was carefully and tenderly cleaning the neck of a guitar with its strings removed.

"Young man, here I am thinking that it's about time for you to come! I'm really happy, yeah?"





Upon noticing me, she put the guitar down and stood up.

"You're here to buy strings for your bass, right?"

I jumped in shock and nodded my head in a daze. How does Senpai know?

"There's something that I'll have to apologize to you."

As she said that, she took out the bass' strings from a rack to the side of the counter, which has a lot of compartments.

"..... Which is?"

"I actually did something to the third string, so that it would snap more easily."

"Haa?" I gave a strange cry. "Why did you do that?"

"You burn-out really easily, right? I was thinking that you may coop yourself up in your house if you start to get tired of it halfway. If your string so happens to snap right then..... See, isn't that a perfect excuse for you to come see me?"

"So let me pay for that!" Senpai smiled as she took out three thousand-yen bills from her wallet, and put them into the cashier. Compared to the strings for guitars, the strings for a bass are shockingly pricey, but the shop owners will always help you change them. I was surprised, and for a moment I could not speak. I always thought that tuning will cause the strings to wear easily, so in actual fact the strings don't break that easily?

"What do you plan to do if I decide to give up on bass because of the broken string?"





"Then there's nothing else I can do. I thought about it before - I'll give up if things are not fated to be. However, you still came running to me, right?"

Senpai said that with a smiling face, so there's nothing much for me to say.

"You got the score?"

I nodded my head, and took out the score which was handwritten by Senpai from my bass casing.

"So, you're not here to complain about how the score is too difficult for you, right?"

"No..... nothing." I moved my eyes away and cooked up a lie.

"Where have you played till?"

"..... At about the forth variation, but I was stuck there ever since. I couldn't play the fugue at all, and I don't think it's possible for me to do so."

Senpai quickly finished tuning the newly strung bass, and then she began to play it while sitting on the counter. I listened to the fugue with a complicated feeling.

The music played by Mafuyu's guitar is like it's directly shaved out from a giant pillar of ice. In contrast, Kagurazaka-senpai's performance is like the frozen rays of winter - her music appeared unknowingly all of the sudden, and pierces right through the clouds. It is really unbelievable to see such clear sounds flowing smoothly without any hiccups.

After she was done with the performance, Senpai returned the bass to me. For a while, I couldn't bring myself to face her.





"It's not that hard! I didn't use any special techniques either. Just reduce the tempo by half, and carefully play through each and every note."

"Senpai....."

I quietly muttered that with my head still lowered.

"Hmm?"

"Why can't you recruit Mafuyu by yourself? You play better than me anyway."

"Didn't I say that before already? It has to be you."

I shook my head weakly.

"Even if it's me, I can't converse much with Mafuyu either. Mafuyu is unwilling to tell me anything, and all I did is make her angry....."

Senpai took out two round stools from the counter, and placed them in the aisle that displays the guitars. She then made me sit down by pressing me on my shoulders.

"It's not just that."

"..... Eh?" I lifted my head. Senpai shifted her sight away from my face slightly, and it floated upwards slowly.

"That's not all there is to it. You see, before I knew the existence of Ebisawa Mafuyu, I already knew about you."

I gradually found it difficult to breathe. What's Senpai talking about now?





"Young man, you do know about a music magazine named 'Friends of Musicians', right? In the July issue two years back, I read a critique that was published in it, and the title is 'Handel and the verses in the bible'. The article is roughly about how Handel's pieces, including those that aren't music, can all be interpreted as verses. Even though the logic's a little far-fetched, it still felt rather amazing. It's a rather touching article."

I was still dazed while I hugged onto my bass tightly with my arms.

Of course I know that article. It's because, that critique—

"I took a look at the name of the writer, and it was Hikawa Tetsurou, a critic whom I'm very familiar with. However, something didn't feel quite right. The article was written in English simple enough for middle-school students to read, and the examples cited in it should not have existed in the middle-school education which Hikawa Tetsurou should have received, since he was already in his forties."

"Ah....."

There's..... There's actually someone who notices that?

"That strange feeling caused me to shift my suspicion to the whole article. I took out older magazines and revised them, by rereading every single critique written by Hikawa Tetsurou. Somehow, a few articles stood out from the rest, and all these articles shared the same weird feeling as well. I searched for a few CD reviews as well, and I managed to find one for <[Finlandia](#)>, which was played by Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and conducted by Karajan in 1959."

I gulped. My dry throat was sore.

"However, I couldn't find anymore concrete evidence after that. I didn't know anyone





from the publisher either - all I knew was that Hikawa Tetsurou had a child. What I know is, for some unknown reason, he had written about his son in his articles quite a few times, and had even wrote out his name. Therefore, when I found that name in the booklet that detailed the names of all the newcomers - I guess you can understand how shocked I was then, right?"

With a light smile on her face, Senpai prodded my nose with her finger.

"The criminal is you."

"..... Urm, what do you mean by criminal?"

"All my deductions are correct, right?"

Senpai suddenly pulled her face close to mine, and I could only nod my head.

There was actually someone in this world who found out the articles I had done in Tetsurou's name, just by reading the articles alone.

"Therefore, I have already been paying attention to you for a long time, young man. I need a secretary in my revolutionary army, and I can't think of anyone that is more suitable for that position than you. Thus, it's not me asking you to join along the way while I am trying to recruit Ebisawa Mafuyu."

Senpai placed her hands on my shoulders.

"— I want you."

Don't say that sort of thing to me at such a close distance when we're all alone here. My mind was in a mess, and I couldn't say anything. In order to avoid Senpai's gaze, I turned my head away and packed my bass.





"However, for someone like me....."

I confirmed the touch of my casing.

"It's not like I'll benefit the band by joining. I can't play as well as Mafuyu does, and I probably will never catch up to her. All this while, I've..... always been listening to music by myself."

Senpai narrowed her eyes and stared at me for quite a while. She then suddenly diverted her gaze, and yelled towards my back,

"Comrade Aihara, it's about time you show yourself. Want to come in?"

I turned my head around in shock. Chiaki was standing in the shadows of the few guitars next to the door. She quietly showed herself. There was a gentle expression on her face.

"You must have stalked young man all the way here, right? As expected from a fighter in my revolutionary army. You are quite adept at stealth missions as well."

"I didn't stalk him." Chiaki said that angrily, and stomped all the way over.

"Senpai, you can't say things that will frighten Nao!"

"That jealous look of yours is really cute too!"

Senpai patted Chiaki's head lovingly. I looked at her with a dumbfounded expression as well.

Did she really stalk me all the way here? Is that really true, or is it not?





Chiaki glared at me while saying, "I just so happened to come here to take a look around, and it just so happened that Nao was inside, so it was inconvenient for me to enter." Senpai consoled her by saying, "I understand, I understand."

"Comrade Aihara, did you bring your drum sticks along?"

"..... Drum sticks?" Chiaki tilted her head, then nodded.

"Mmm. I'll go wake up that sleeping shopkeeper inside and borrow the key to the recording room."

Senpai shifted her gaze to me, and turned her hand into the shape of a gun. She then pretended to fire a shot into my chest.

"Young man, let me light your passion ablaze."

The third floor of Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store was modified into a recording room for rent. There are two tightly shut doors along the long and narrow passageway. After opening the door before me, I was greeted by a room that is four-and-a-half tatami big, out of which about a half of the area is occupied by the drums. On both sides are two giant guitar amplifiers. There's also mikes and recording equipment, as well as an asphyxiating smell of smoke.

"I've specially allowed you guys in, all thanks to the welfare given to me as an employee here." And with that, Kagurazaka-senpai pushed me into the recording room. Chiaki followed in as well.

"Whoa— it's been a long time since I've played on real drums."





Chiaki sat in the middle of the drum set, and was tuning the snare drum rather happily.

Kagurazaka-senpai then connected my bass and her guitar into the amplifiers in that sequence. Senpai's guitar is a Gibson Les Paul, which is said to cost a million yen - though I've no idea if that is true or not. If so, that is probably an old 'Historic Collection' series. From the colors of the guitar, it should be a replica of the 60's series?

I slung the strap of the bass onto my shoulder, then plucked the string once timidly. An unbearable noise filled the small and cramped recording room.

For some strange reason, I was lead into this recording room by her, just like that.....

"There's no need for you to play something that's overly difficult, young man. You just have to follow the drums and play D in quavers, that's all."

"Haa."

Chiaki lifted the drum sticks high into the air, and said, "Senpai, are you ready?"

The two of them exchanged their sights for a second. Just at the exact instant where the sounds of the cymbals disappeared, I was surrounded by a music that was moving forward at a heavy pace. Chiaki began to hit out a series of powerful quavers with the hi-hat, and on the drums she was overlapping the quavers with triplets. The slowly rising and screeching guitar riffs were like the faltering footsteps of a traveler heading towards the seas with a cane in his hand.

I tried tapping along to the rhythm of Chiaki, and then I quietly strummed the bass. Initially, I could not believe that the low notes that were pressing up against my





abdomen were actually coming from my bass. The three different melodies then began to mash together stiffly, and entwined—

From which, came the sounds of a singing voice—

It's the voice of Kagurazaka-senpai.

It's like the whispers of the night in the desert - though her voice was slightly hoarse, but it had transmitted all the way to the horizon on the other end.

It's Led Zeppelin's <[Kashmir](#)>.

It's a song that I have heard countless times. I listened to this song in bed deep in the middle of the night repeatedly for many times, countless of times. And now, my fingers were playing out the pulse of the song.

At the places where the song was falling silent, the guitar replied with a similar phrase of music. Chiaki maintained her footsteps and marched on endlessly and continuously. I had already erased from my mind whatever Senpai had told me. When the guitar began playing the winding stretches of the Arabian style of music, I began searching for the low notes that should be hidden within the song, and wove them out with my fingertips.







I really felt that the song could continue on forever.

Therefore, when the song finally stopped, I felt just as though I was left alone in a desolate desert. The room was filled with a rumbling sound, but I could no longer differentiate if that was just the noise, the echoes, or the memories of <Kashmir> that had seeped into my ears.

Chiaki's face was flushed red, and she was staring at me with her forehead filled with sweat. A seemingly triumphant smile appeared on her face. I turned my sight away, and this time, the graceful sight of Kagurazaka-senpai entered my eyes.

I don't know why— but I could not look right into her face.

"..... Young man, what do you think the bass is?"

I slowly lifted my head. There was no smile on Senpai's face, but her gaze was gentle.

"If we are to see the band as a person, then the lead singer will be the head, while the guitar are the hands....."

Senpai moved her sight away from her hands and shifted it into the direction of Chiaki.

"If the drums are the legs, then which part do you think the bass represents?"

I could not answer Senpai's riddle. From the moment I was born up till now, I had always played the role of someone who accepts things.

Senpai finally broke into a gentle smile, and walked towards me quickly. She placed her palm on my chest, which made me jump in a huge shock. My body froze.





"It's here, young man."

As she stared face to face straight into my eyes, Senpai continued,

"The heart. You understand now? Without you, we would not be able to move."

I was stunned speechless. What replied to her in my place, was the pulse of my heart.

If I am to see the band as a person.

I was not moving forward by following in their footsteps. As someone who was placing himself in a sound shared with others for the very first time, that was something which I was most certain of. If I was to listen to the CD alone in my own room, I would have probably never understood that.

Then, I was probably thinking of the same thing as Senpai. If only Mafuyu was here—

The sound of that guitar. If only it was here—

I gripped the neck of my bass tightly. I finally understood - that is the reason why I'm playing the bass. It's not an excuse, but an actual reason - it is so that I can transmit this blazing heat to Mafuyu.





Chapter 12

Memories, Promise, Excuses



*Our promise will be
with you the whole time.
So don't you forget it.*





With us engrossed in our practice, the following two weeks went by in a flash, and before long the end of May had finally arrived. The skin on my left fingertips were hard like dried soil. Since the strings of the bass are much thicker than those of a guitar, the position of the calluses on my fingers are slightly different than those of Kagurazaka-senpai's.

"You look more like a bassist now."

Senpai couldn't help but let out a loud laugh when our fingertips came into contact like the scene of the alien in ET. However, the callus had caused some slight changes to my sense of touch - they affected me when I was doing something delicate with machines, so it's a little inconvenient.

Still, before issuing a challenge to Mafuyu, there's another thing that requires me to utilize my interest of fooling about with machines.

On the fourth Thursday of May, I ran straight to the courtyard after school. Chiaki was trying all means to retain Mafuyu - though optimistically speaking she could probably keep her off for only about twenty minutes? I'll have to win this battle with speed. I first started by picking the padlock open, and that took me less than a minute. Then, I turned the handle slightly as usual, and opened the lock to enter the room. Replicating the multiple imaginary scenarios I had earlier, I took out the tools and the wires from my bag, and began to work on the amplifier. I swiftly opened the back cover of the amplifier, and the internals of the machine which I had worked on various times came into full view before my eyes. Rewiring the circuits isn't that much of a problem; hiding the newly extended wire took up the bulk of the time.

After everything was done, I locked the padlock, and just when I was about to return to the main building, I accidentally bumped into Mafuyu along the corner.

The two of us just stood there without moving. Neither of us had our eyes focused on





the other party.

Ever since that day, we hardly spoke to each other. Because of that, those fellas in the class were all complaining about how their only source of information to the Princess was blocked off. However, none of them knew about the details behind it.

Just as I was planning to walk past her, Mafuyu spoke,

"Have you..... given up already?"

"..... Eh?"

"Bass. You used to play it on top of the roof."

"I'm still playing it, yeah? Just that I have been practicing on the roof of the northern building, because I don't wanna disturb someone who has unexceptionally sharp ears."

"Liar. I went there to look for you as well, and you weren't around."

That was indeed a lie. Recently, I had been going to Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store to get a bassist whom Senpai knows to take a look and oversee my practice. As I had no intention of letting her know about me practicing fervently, I wove out that lie.

"..... You just said you looked for me? What do you mean by that?"

"Ah, that's..... you don't have to mind that, it's nothing. I'm just slightly worried."

Mafuyu's voice became even more anxious, and she shook her head repeatedly.





"I'm just thinking..... if you're still thinking about that incident back then?"

I jumped in shock, and turned around. It seemed like Mafuyu was finding it difficult to speak, and she kept staring at her fingers.

"Please forget about that. I'm totally fine, so you don't have to be concerned about it."

Please forget it. I've heard that countless times from Mafuyu already.

I felt a slight anger stirring within me. I guess I'll just tell her my feelings truthfully—

"Look, what are you treating the human brain as? Our brains aren't like some hard disk. Do you think that a simple 'Memory delete' from you will make me go 'Oh, like this?' and I'll forget everything?"

Mafuyu's eyes widened, and she took a step back.

"I forgot nothing, and in fact I remember them all clearly. You said, 'Do you think you can catch up to me by playing the bass?' Let's have a showdown tomorrow after school."

"..... What do you mean by having a showdown?"

"A showdown between my bass and your guitar, that's what. If I can catch up with you right till the end in terms of playing, then it will be my victory. If I win, I'll be allowed to use that room. If I lose, I'll never get close ever again."

"Are you serious..... about that?"





Of course! But I said nothing more, and walked past Mafuyu just like that.

To be honest, I'm not even remotely confident about winning. But Kagurazaka-senpai did say before, that she will make me win the showdown — it's not 'I will win', but 'she will make victory mine'.

A person who will use all sorts of (dirty?) methods to get her hands on whatever she wants — my spine was chilled by the fact that those mere words from her mouth were enough to grant me so much courage. I guess the only person whom I can depend on right now is her.

"Young man, you've become quite good with your words."

When I arrived at the roof, Kagurazaka-senpai said that to me. It seems like she was watching us from the fence.

"I really can't believe you were that born loser three weeks ago."

"Don't call me a born loser!" I shifted my sight away from Senpai. I have no idea why, but ever since that day, I felt rather embarrassed whenever I look straight at her.

"When I think deeper into it, there's nothing for me to lose from this showdown anyway. Originally, I can't use that practice room anyway, so it's fine even if I lose. It's just like the rock-scissors-paper match I had with Senpai back then."

Half of the reason for that sort of twisted thinking was due to my self mockery. However, Senpai sat next to me while hugging onto the bass, and flashed a satisfied smile on her face.





"So you still remember what I did during that match."

I looked at the side of Senpai's face, and nodded my tilted head. Back then, Senpai declared a match against me while holding onto a pick in her index and middle finger. Upon seeing that, I thought she was trying to trick me into thinking that she wouldn't be throwing scissors, so I just went for it — with my brain in a huge mess, I threw out rock, and in the end I lost to Senpai. However, Senpai laughed out loudly and said,

"Actually, I was not trying to read your thoughts and use them against you. Even if I did that, it will not increase the odds of me winning such a simple game. What do you think is the sure-fire method of winning rock-scissors-paper?"

"Eh?" That means Senpai had used a sure-win method?

"It's simple. Just throw out last."

"Huh?"

"There's actually no special reason behind me holding onto the pick with my fingers, other than to make you all confused, so that you will throw out your choice to my tempo. That's all. Remember this well: the sure-win method is to make yourself go last."

I was shocked speechless, and just stared at Senpai's triumphant face. I then let out a long sigh in between my knees. It's impossible. There's no chance of me winning against someone like her right from the very beginning.

"It's always been said that battles are won long before they have even started - that's exactly what it means by that. Which means, the important part is how you lure your opponent into your own territory. Oh right, do you know the reason why I chose this





song to be the song for your showdown against Mafuyu? I'll tell you."

With that, she took out the scores from a file in a casing behind us and spread it out before us. She then said, "There's four reasons as to why I picked this piece."

"Then just tell me right from the beginning!" That thought flashed past my mind for a brief moment. For the past few days, I've been thinking about that while practicing: why this piece? However, after listening to Senpai's lengthy explanation, I could only answer her with a sigh.

"— So are you slowly believing that you have a chance of winning this?"

"Mmm..... A little."

I answered truthfully. The chance of me winning has increased multiple folds — it's 0.2% now! That's probably how I'm feeling right now. Senpai bumped her shoulder into mine as she laughed.

"That's good enough! Only you will know how your battle will unfold. All I know are the results of my own battles, because I won't be taking part in the battle between you two."

"If you took over my place, you'd win..... is that what Senpai is trying to say?"

I asked weakly. Senpai answered me with a slightly angry voice,

"Can I actually win?"

I looked at Senpai's face in shock.

"Didn't I say it already? It has to be you."





I couldn't reply to that, and thus I lowered my head again.

Senpai suddenly took out a piece of paper, and snuffed it into the tip of my nose.

"Well then, this is the final preparation. Sign this first, so that you are mentally prepared for it. This copy's for Ebisawa Mafuyu."

I lifted my head to take a look. It was the application form for joining a club, which is printed on coarse paper - there's two of them. For both of them, the words 'Folk Music Research Club' were written neatly using a pen in the box where one is supposed to fill in the name of the club.

I shifted my eyes away, and tried to divert the topic.

"Urm..... I guess I'll just..... keep these two forms for now."

"Why? I've already taught you so much about bass. Could it be..... that you actually hate me? Is that it?"

Please don't look at me with such a sorrowful expression. You are obviously faking that.

"Mmm, how should I put it?"

I removed the bass from my knees.

"I don't feel I'm qualified. The standards of both Senpai and Chiaki are too high for me."

"I said it before already, didn't I? I'm not asking you to follow us. We should be the





ones following you."

Because the bass is the heart. I do know that, but still.....

"Still, I can't decide if I'm to join the club or not. At least for not now. Therefore....."

I lifted the bass, and stared at its strings.

"Therefore, if I manage to win against Mafuyu, and make her join the club....."

"If you can beat her, you'll join us too?"

I nodded in reply.

If it's not like that, then I'll definitely regret it. It somehow feels like I have no say in everything that has been paved out for me.

"Then..... what will you do if you lose?" That sentence from Senpai caused me to be breathless from shock. I never thought about that.

However, I still have to make my decision right now.

"..... Even if I lose, I'll still play the bass - however, I won't be joining the club. Senpai has been looking after me this whole time, so I can't bring myself to say things like..... please allow me to join the club even if I lose."

After a short moment of silence, I could hear Senpai giving out a gentle sigh next to me.

"I've only understood this recently, but you are a man with really strong self-esteem."





She showed a gentle smile. I could barely open my eyes any longer, but to shift my gaze away after a brief look into her face.

"We'll treat this as a promise between us for the day which is still faraway. Yeah, let's do just that."

Senpai took out a screwdriver from my bag (without my consent), and removed the back cover of the bass. She folded the two application forms into two small pieces, then stuffed it in the empty space located between all the wiring. She then screwed the cover back into place.

"..... Why are you putting them in a place like that?"

"Try listening to it. There should be the faint sounds of the papers rubbing against each other."

I placed the bass back on my knees. Senpai then strummed the string. The sounds of the paper rubbing against each other—

"Nope, I hear nothing?"

"But I can hear that!" Your ears are comparable to those of a cat's. "And maybe Ebisawa Mafuyu can hear them too. She is really sensitive to the sound of paper rubbing against each other, right? Perhaps these minute sounds can affect her subconscious, and cause her to become uneasy and frustrated."

There's such logic behind it?

"To go a little more far-fetched, it's a sort of spell. Just like how the samurais will sew the amulets of protection onto their clothes."





Senpai patted my bass.

"Our promise will be with you the whole time. So don't you forget it."

After a moment of hesitation, I nodded.

"I wish you good luck."

I just so happened to meet Miss Maki on my way back home. After walking into the ordinary carriage which will stop at each and every station, she asked,

"Seems like you have been chatting with Mafuyu quite a lot recently?"

I shrunk my head as I grabbed onto the overhead handles. I've been caught by a troublesome person.

"No, you can't quite consider that chatting."

"Just be straightforward and tell her that you'd love to share that room with her? Why are all the boys that eccentric?"

You think I could say that? Me? To Mafuyu?

"And also, what have you been doing recently? Seems like you've been together with the second-year Kagurazaka quite frequently, right?"

"Oh, well....."

With her vice grip grabbing onto the back of my collar, I had no other option but to





tell her the truth.

"A guitar showdown?"

Miss Maki suddenly gave out a strange sound, which resulted in the rest of the passengers directing their attention to us.

"Should I say that you're stupid, or that you're similar to Kagurazaka....."

Miss Maki gave a sigh as she voiced out her thoughts. Is Kagurazaka-senpai that famous among the teachers as well? She doesn't seem to attend any lessons, so perhaps she is one of those so called problematic students or something?

"Then Mafuyu said she's okay with the proposal? How can that be possible?"

"No, she was just stunned."

"Yeah, that's more like it! Then what are you going to do? Do you really want to do this?"

"Sigh, there's a lot of reasons behind it. I'll put my best into this."

I replied vaguely. I couldn't possibly tell Miss Maki about the various things that we've done to make Mafuyu participate in the showdown.

Miss Maki knitted her beautiful pair of eyebrows for a moment, and pressed her finger against her temple.

"Look..... I am very grateful to you for interacting with Mafuyu, but don't provoke her too much. She's a really delicate girl."





"Oh."

Even if she told me that, but for some unknown reason, I couldn't help but get angry at how she wanted me to be gentle towards Mafuyu. That lass has said many terrible things to me you know?

"Mmm....." Miss Maki crossed her arms before her chest, and her expression suggested that she didn't know what she should say. "I think, the majority of the problems are due to a certain psychological issue she's having. Therefore—"

"..... What do you mean? What's this 'psychological issue' that Miss Maki is referring to?"

Miss Maki stared at me without saying a single word. She then mumbled to herself with a hoarse voice, "If the person is Nao, then it should be fine telling him....." But then she immediately shook her head and canceled that thought of hers.

"I can't be the one to tell you this. It will be for the best if Mafuyu is willing to tell you about it."

Psychological issues. I recalled the time when Mafuyu was holding tightly to a bag of medicine in her hands.

So Mafuyu's really sick? I can't quite see that from the outside, but if—

"Urm, Miss Maki....." I thought of something else, and so I decided to ask her about it. "Mafuyu..... I heard she is about to transfer away soon. Is that true?"

"Transfer? Why?"

"..... Ah, nothing."





She's disappearing in June. Then..... what does that actually mean? I said nothing, and once again sank into my own thoughts. In any case, Mafuyu said nothing to me at all.

"A showdown through guitars huh..... that's youth for you! But that may be a good thing as well."

Miss Maki smiled as she gazed into the distance.

"And Mafuyu has no intention of making friends. Even though it may be slightly unreasonable for me to be doing this, but it is quite a good idea to force her to join a club. If so, I'll be the adviser for your club!"

"So you think..... I can win?"

"No, not at all."

Miss Maki answered immediately. I gripped hard onto the handle and slumped my head in disappointment.

"However, I heard that she only started playing the guitar half a year ago."

"Really?" She can achieve such skills within half a year? God is really unfair.

"Still, everyone will go through things like this, right? There are times where you just have to do the things you need to do. All the best, my boy. If you make Mafuyu cry, I'll never let you off the hook easily."

With that, Miss Maki gave me a hard slap on my back.





That night, Tetsurou wasn't home. I received a short message from him via cellphone: "I'm drinking with a friend, so I probably won't be home tonight." I was thinking of asking him a few more things about Mafuyu, but that guy is never around during the most crucial moments.

I returned to my room and sat on my bed. After putting the bass on my legs, my fingers began to strum on the strings subconsciously. I then realized I was playing the bass of that piano concerto unknowingly.

It's the piece which Mafuyu played at the junkyard on the day when we first met.

I went into Tetsurou's room, and began stacking up the CDs of various piano concertos of the late romantic era, then took them all to the living room. I spent the whole night listening to all the CDs continuously, to the point where I had even skipped my dinner. However, I did not manage to locate the track in my memory. That's not surprising though, since there are a few thousand piano concertos.

I switched off the sound system, and gave up trying to find it.

I suddenly remembered my declaration to Mafuyu when I was tuning my bass: "If I lose, I'll never get close ever again." That line suddenly appeared in my mind, but wow. What the heck was I saying? What I meant was that I'll never get close to that room, and that I'll never get close to Mafuyu, right? And since our seats are right next to each other, it will be impossible for me not to be close to her, right? In the end, I was endlessly trying to explain things to some random unknown person in my mind.

What will happen if I lose? I kept thinking that.





My excuse for talking to Mafuyu will disappear along with that as well, right?

And I did say that I won't join the Folk Music Research Club if I lose. That's because I have no confidence of starting a band with Senpai and Chiaki should that happen.

I recalled the song we played in the recording room that day - <Kashmir>. That is a wonderfully sweet experience that makes one breathless, and I felt like my body was burning in flames.

There's nothing to lose - what a incredibly huge lie that was.

Unknown to me, there were many things around me which I may end up losing. Things that I do not want to lose.

If I lose—

I shook my head, and threw that thought out of my mind. It's pointless to be thinking about all that now.

Tomorrow — I can only do my best and rock on.





Chapter 13

Eroica



*As the representative of rock,
I am here to take revenge on
the stubborn classical supremacist.*





The skies of the last Friday of May were filled with dark clouds. As I could not fall asleep, I headed to school early in the morning. Once I entered the classroom, I was immediately surrounded by my classmates.

"I heard you're gonna have a showdown with the Princess today?"

"What? What do you mean by showdown? What will happen if he loses?"

"Perhaps he will be her slave for life?" "Then isn't that the same as things are now?"

My face turned green after hearing everyone saying things like that.

"Urm..... Well..... Why..... does everyone know about this?"

"Didn't you talk to Ebisawa in the courtyard yesterday?"

"You guys saw?"

"The atmosphere was quite nice, but you just have to say things like having a showdown. The audience was really disappointed!"

It's not like we were putting on a show there.

"So, when are you guys competing? Competing in what? What does the winner get?"

Ah, so they didn't hear about the part where we will be having the showdown later after school? That's fantastic. Despite me trying to divert the topic, it still ended with me telling them everything other than the place and time of the showdown.

"A new club? With Ebisawa? And Aihara? And Kagurazaka-senpai too?"





Why are they so damn excited?

"The Kagurazaka-senpai you are referring to is the one in second-year?"

"Yeah, the one who looks like the head of a band of female ninjas."

What sort of analogy is that? I can't understand that at all! Then again, is Senpai that well known in school?

"Starting a band in that small room together with those three girls? Nao! That's unforgivable, so you better lose!"

"I'd rather you win, then I'll take over your place in the band." "Yeah, you definitely must win, and then I'll join in too." "You know nuts about instruments, right?" "I can be in charge of moving the instruments." "Then..... I'll be in charge of wiping their sweat." "Somehow, I'm feeling more and more motivated."

And they actually started singing our school song - I felt like I should just run out of the room. Just as they were discussing on the topic regarding the time of the showdown, Chiaki walked into the classroom, and that silenced everyone. I'm saved.....

"Are you guys saying bad stuff about me?"

The few guys flashed an awkward smile, before returning to their seats. Seems like everyone had finally learned one of the basics etiquettes in society - not to gossip about the person in front of her.

During lunch break, my desk was filled with sauce cutlet bread which the guys purchased from the store: seems like they were all praying for my victory. But how can I possibly finish that much bread!





"Nao, you mustn't lose."

"Though I'm not too sure of what's happening, but you definitely must win!" One by one, they grabbed onto my shoulders and cheered me on. I just stared at the pyramid of sauce cutlet bread blankly. It's not like there's zero chance of me fulfilling their expectations, but with everyone being that excited about it, I was honestly quite troubled by them.

After school, I brought my bass to the roof. Though Senpai wanted me to go there first, I didn't see her around when I got there. Then again, I remember she has work today? I then spotted something placed on the floor near the fence where Senpai usually sits. I walked over to take a look, and it's actually John Lennon's album of covers, <Rock 'n' Roll>. The second song of the CD is simply titled as <[Stand by Me](#)>. I took out my discman, and placed the CD inside. As I listened to the hoarse voice of John Lennon, I looked downwards through the fence and waited. I took out a piece of unfinished sauce cutlet bread and stuffed it into my mouth.

Halfway into the song, I suddenly remembered how Mafuyu will always head straight home on Fridays. Shit, I actually forgot that.

But just then, the back of a girl together with her maroon colored hair came into sight. I was at ease. What's going on? She doesn't have to do what she usually needs to do?

Even as I watched Mafuyu walk into the practice room, I still allowed the song to flow from my earpieces and into my body. I grabbed hard on to the fence and stood there motionlessly till John Lennon's voice faded away.

I switched off my discman, and carried my bass.





When I reached the practice room, I heard Mafuyu playing Beethoven's bagatelle on the other side of the door. I stopped in my tracks and thought of how I should enter the room. I came up with various lame ways, such as kicking the door open with my foot and then yelling 'Sorry to disturb!', but in the end I decided to just knock on the door.

The bagatelle suddenly stopped, as if it was shocked motionless.

The uncomfortable silence was like a gush of bone-chilling cold air that seeped through from the gaps, and it persisted for quite a while.

"Urm....." I was the first to talk, but I had no idea what to do. "I'm here to compete with you. I told you about it yesterday, right?"

The door opened.

Mafuyu's guitar was slung on her shoulders. She took a look at me, then lowered her gaze.

"..... You really came."

From the tone of Mafuyu, I could sense that something was not quite right. Somehow, she's different from usual.

"As the representative of rock, I am here to take revenge on the stubborn classical supremacist."

"You idiot! Are you serious about this? You didn't even know how to do the





hammer-on a few days ago."

Don't belittle me. Then again, why did she even know things like that?

"You peeked at me practicing?"

"N-No."

With her face flushed red, Mafuyu slammed the door shut with her two hands.

"— Why do you have to do such a thing? Do you really want to use this room that badly?"

Why did I keep doing such things? Ah, I don't even know it myself.

Senpai did say that it is for love and revolution.

Chiaki said this before: "You are very concerned about Ebisawa, right?"

I don't know. But I cannot allow things to go on like this.

Mafuyu said from the other side of the door,

"Just do whatever you wish over there! I don't care anymore."

Just this once, I chose to remain silent.

Oh well. I already knew things would turn out like this.

I took out my bass and plugged in the cable, then I squatted down near the door. There's a hole beneath the hinge of the door which I can directly plug my cable into.





That is the result of my fifteen minute work yesterday - a cable that extended from the amplifiers and installed next to the door.

Just as I was about to hijack the stereo device, my hand stopped. For some unknown reason, I suddenly remembered a certain piece of musical history which Tetsurou once told me half in jest.

It starts with a small stream in Germany. The river flows into a beet plantation, then later spreads throughout the whole of Europe. It clashes with the local music, and was either engulfed by the music, or it ended up swallowing the music instead. It then flows into the seas, and spread through the whole world. That's how a lot of things in this world are born, and rock is one of them.

Therefore, if we are to seek out the history of invasion and integration that spans over three hundred years, all the things will be linked to each other.

I plugged the cable into the hole.

At that instance, a sharp screech blared out from the amplifiers on the other side of the door.

I could almost see the frightened looks of Mafuyu.

"What have you done?"

She found out. In reply, I turned the volume of my bass to its loudest. The room was filled with feedback.

"Hey, what are you do—"

In order to drown her voice, I played the opening note of the piece. Allegretto vivace.





I must not play it too quickly — as if I was stepping on the floor with force, but at the same time seeking for a place to step on with my toes; to use the low notes to stomp out the boundaries of the octave, and then to retreat back a little with slightly hesitant steps.

I could even hear Mafuyu holding her breathes in shock. Of course, she should know what piece this is just from these eight bars. She had released an album with this piece inside two years ago in February. I had listened to that CD many times, to the point where the CD is close to being damaged.

It's Beethoven's 35 piece, <Variations and Fugue for Piano in E \flat major> - the variations were later used in his <Symphony No. 3>. There's another title to this piano piece, which is <[Eroica Variations](#)>.

Back then—

Kagurazaka-senpai did tell me that there's four reason for choosing that piece.

"It's just as you can see....." Senpai began pointing at the scores as she explains on. "This is a piece that starts off with a single melody in low-pitch. In the opening thirty-two bars, only the bass will play, and one can immediately realize that this is <Eroica>. With this, we'll be able to fire the first salvo, and pull the opponent into our music."

With that, Senpai tapped at the tempo marking it with her finger.

"It's allegretto vivace, so don't ever go too fast. One of the weapons of Ebisawa Mafuyu is to be able to strum her guitar accurately at great speeds. Should the showdown turn into the situation where the speed will decide the victory..... young





man, you will lose all chances of winning. You can decide on the speed of the whole piece via the opening thirty-two bars — that's the first reason I chose this piece."

"But....." There was a hint of uneasiness in my voice. "At this part that leads to the overture, there is a place where the four voices will merge, and the melody after that will be the part where Mafuyu starts to play! If she starts to rush at then....."

"Young man, all you are thinking about is the areas in which you may lose....."

Senpai shook her head and let out a sigh. I curled my body up. I'm sorry, but I am a born loser.

"Don't worry. This is the second reason why I chose this piece. This variation....."

Senpai scanned through the scores quickly. A variation is actually a technique where a short main theme is repeatedly played by altering the playing styles, or even the melody. In general, the similar parts will be repeated for several cycles.

"Almost every variation will have *ritardando* and *fermata* at their later part. You get it now? There's a 'pause' after a certain fixed distance. No matter how fast Ebisawa Mafuyu speeds up the tempo to, the *fermata* will always disrupt the flow of her playing, and with that you can get back your own *allegro*. This piece of music is unique in that sense."

Phew — I heaved a loud sigh. Indeed, everything makes sense. I am certain that this is the only piece possible. If it is this piece, then I may actually win.

"And the third reason....." Senpai gave a sinister smile, "This piece is in E \flat major."





I recalled each and every sentence which Senpai had said, walked through the opening theme with heavy steps. At the end of the low-pitched melody which I played, was a long pause. Mafuyu's guitar finally made a recovery, and the noise of her electric guitar overwhelmed the pause.

I held onto my breath as we went into the second overture, a series of simple yet hesitant melodies of the guitar entered. Goosebumps appeared on my skin in an instant. The ingenious use of syncopation moved and infused just two of the overlapping tones. However, all the music that we know is born from that intoxicating feeling that one gets when two sounds overlaps each other.

In the third overture, I threw a simple line of melody towards Mafuyu. The high flying high-pitched notes of the guitar descended into the low-pitched notes of the bass - it seemed as if Mafuyu's steps had past right through the torrential waterfalls.

Mafuyu's guitar lead the forth overture, and took over the main theme. The whole melody shifted an octave higher, and skipped through the brisk middle octave beneath it. The tempo suddenly hastened, and even though I was thrown about by the huge force, I finally managed to barely grab onto the gaps in between the phrases of Mafuyu's melody, and pried them wide open with my low notes, which acted as an intermediary between them. It's a goner if I am to fall here, and there's no chance for me to start all over. I applied the brakes to restrain Mafuyu.

We've finally reached the main theme, but I was barely hanging on by a thread as well. It should be your ordinary chord accompaniment, but my fingers were trembling non stop. I desperately tried to get back the original tempo using the short pause. Mafuyu never slowed down despite going into the second variation with a merciless speed - Mafuyu could continuously play triple notes in the time it took me to play a single one.

I took a deep breath before going into the forth variation. That will be the first crisis.





As my fingers were strumming the sixteen-beat legato smoothly, I did realize that Mafuyu was currently with the slight disadvantage - Mafuyu's simple theme sounded wobbly amid the constant rising and falling of my timbre. She probably thought I wouldn't know how to play that part out. I held my breath and focused my attention on the intense passage. I then recalled the words of Kagurazaka-senpai yet again.

"E ♭ major is—"

As she gently caressed the guitar on my knee with her fingertips, she said,

"You should know, right? It's one of the most difficult scales to play on the bass and the guitar."

I nodded my head.

Simply put, scales that are easy for guitars are those that do not require the guitarist to press onto the chords much as they play. However, the E ♭ which frequently appears in the E ♭ major is a semitone lower than the lowest note playable by the guitar or the bass. As a result, the guitarist will need to press on the higher ends of the chords during the playing, and that is something rather difficult in terms of the finger movements.

"The E ♭ major is just as difficult for Ebisawa Mafuyu, especially during the part where she has to play the middle-pitched notes during the high-pitched melody. Even if speed is her greatest weapon in her arsenal, she will definitely be severely weakened by that."





"Urm, no, wait....."

I gave a knock on my bass.

"It will be equally difficult for me to play too, right? Isn't that so?"

The strings of the bass and the strings of the guitar are of the same tone during tuning, so the parts of both parties will be equally difficult to play. Because of this, Senpai had specially shifted the pitch upwards by a semitone in her composition, and converted it to E major.

"Young man....." The expressions in Senpai's eyes were no longer that of irritation - instead, it had changed into a pitiful gaze. "Do you still remember what I said? I said we will be doing exactly what Paganini did, right?"

"Eh.....?"

I do..... remember something like that.

That's..... something that happened on the day when Senpai was picking out the piece through a huge stack of CDs and scores. After hearing the sounds of Mafuyu's guitar, Senpai did mention Paganini's name out of the blue.

"..... But, how do you explain that?"

"Paganini's <[Violin Concerto No. 1](#)>. You should know that, right?"

I tilted my head, and tried recalling the songs that I should have heard of before. I then remembered the vast knowledge of Tetsurou—

"..... Ah!"





The bass on my knee fall onto the floor with a thud.

Paganini's <Violin Concerto No. 1> — in E ♭ major.

I see, so that's how it is.

"You finally got it?"

"I have to lower it by a semitone when tuning?"

Kagurazaka-senpai laughed and patted my head gently.

The E ♭ major is difficult for violinists in the same way as it is for guitarists. However, the solo in the concerto played by the Violin of the Devil, Niccolò Paganini, is written in E ♭ major. As such, he tuned his violin by a semitone lower—

I just..... have to do exactly like him.

By lowering the strings of the bass by a semitone, I will force Mafuyu to take on the highly difficult E ♭ major, while I am playing the simplest E major.

"..... That's really despicable....."

I accidentally let it slipped through my mouth.

"How's that despicable?" Kagurazaka-senpai prodded my forehead with the pick. "In order to achieve victory, giving out your all till the final moment before the battle is necessary, no? This is also an act of respect for your enemy."





"Urm, that may be the case....."

"The fourth reason, is we will be doing fugue after the variations." Senpai said the final reason.

"Ebisawa Mafuyu will definitely not let go of the fugue. Therefore, we just have to let her know that the piece of music is not something that can be played by a person alone. Those are the reasons for me choosing this piece of music - <Eroica Variations>, because it practically exists for you to use it to defeat Ebisawa Mafuyu. Therefore—"

Senpai placed her two hands on both of my shoulders, and looked straight into my eyes as she said,

"— Resolve yourself, and teach her a good lesson."

After playing through the continuous phrases, I pressed my back hard against the door, and took a huge gulp of air. The strings and the neck of the bass had become slippery due to my sweat. The fifth variation finally returned back to the simple two voices melody, but that short moment of rest was over in an instant. I rushed straight into the sixth variation in C minor without having the chance to slow down the tempo. That was the only part where the lowering of the bass by a semitone was unable to wield its effects. It's as though Mafuyu cleaved open the opening phrase with an axe. The screeching melody dragged my body along, my fingers began to spin, and I played quite a few notes wrongly. I could almost see Mafuyu's rapidly-firing questions appearing at the places where I had planned to stop at - in response, I replied using the same tones that has my stuttering sighs mixed into it.

Even as we entered the beautiful dreamlike canon, Mafuyu was hardly showing any





mercy. If I was just a beat slower, she would immediately smash my line of melody that was trying to sketch out her footsteps, and began the next melody by herself.

I could then feel a slight amount of weight pressing against my back. Even though I could see nothing, I somehow knew..... that Mafuyu was leaning her back against the door, just like me. I could almost hear the heartbeats of Mafuyu, though that could very well be the sound of my own heartbeat, or the echoes of the bass.

Just as the backbeats were sustaining the melody of the tenth variation - the melody of which the dragonflies were fluttering all around us - I became more and more confused. Why am I doing such a thing at a place like this?

I had even forgotten about the fact that I was thinking of all sorts of things as I glanced at the scores in my efforts to keep up with Mafuyu's guitar. The tips that Senpai told me had already disappeared completely from my brain.

All that's left were my fingers moving willfully.

Which of the sounds are made by my bass, and which of them are from Mafuyu's guitar? I don't know. My modified Aria Pro II and Mafuyu's Stratocaster were like twins shaved out from the same piece of wood, and had blended together with each other impeccably. I can't quite explain the phenomenon by saying that they've tuned themselves with each other so as to blend together perfectly. It's like a mere millimeter of distance between them, a circuit bypass, and a careful balance of the high and low tones - a miracle that happens only after the integration of everything mentioned above.

Mafuyu and I were totally like the left and right hands of a person—

And with that, the final variation came. C minor. It's similar to the vastness of the sea in the night that has just experienced a violent storm.





The thunders were gradually receding, but they were still reverberating deep within the clouds.

The whispers from the depths of the ocean.

Using my right hand, I strummed out a low G that extended endlessly outwards.

And then, along with the parting of the clouds, I could finally see the arrival of dawn.

I listened to the rumbling echoes in my stomach intoxicatedly, and loosened my left hand. Then, I gripped onto the neck of the bass tightly with my sweating palms once more.

It's the fugue. I've finally arrived here.

After expelling all of my wishful thoughts that were burning in flames of darkness, what appeared before me was something filled with endless possibilities - the ensemble that was shimmering like crystals. I immediately drew out the first note of the beginning phrase. The four simple voices which existed since the beginning of the war rang, while the main melody of the fugue began its flow along with the signal. After four bars, Mafuyu began chasing the already-running me. Between the two melodies that will not intersect and will never touch each other, exists what seemed like the melody of mirage. Who actually played that - obviously, it's Mafuyu and I. We constantly sent out the fragments of the melody, and they slowly merged into a crystal clear line of melody - it felt like there was a third person playing together with us live. I didn't quite know what was happening either - all I did was play whatever was written in Senpai's scores. Mafuyu seemed to have analyzed the meaning of the tune in an instant, and kept replying to me. That's the only thing I could come up with. However, is that really something that is possible? Without any words, and only transmitting our feelings through music - can this miracle really





happen? Or will the miracle disappear the moment I open my eyes—

..... It gradually disappeared.

I stopped the movements of my fingers.

Mafuyu's melody, which was supposed to be chasing me, had suddenly disappeared.

The hallucinated warmth of Mafuyu which I had been feeling on my back this whole time had disappeared as well.

I turned around. A *eek* sound came from the other side of the door. It's the faint sound produced from the feedback of the guitar.

I had a bad feeling about this.

"..... Mafuyu?"

I tried calling her once. She did not reply.

Instead, I began hearing the ominous sounds of moaning and weeping through the gaps of the door.





Chapter 14

Doctor, Bird Catalogue, Answers



Why didn't I notice that earlier?





"— Mafuyu?"

Since I heard no response despite me yelling out loudly from outside, I began knocking on the door. I suddenly heard the sound of something knocking against the floor, and then another blast of feedback reverberated inside.

I tried to open the door by pressing hard against the handle. For a moment, I forgot about the method of opening the lock, and I nearly tore the door down. I finally remembered: I have to press diagonally downwards to the right before turning it. As the door opened, Mafuyu, who should be leaning against the door, came crashing onto my body instead. I quickly supported her. Mafuyu's back knocked into my bass, and the amplifiers blared out a tight noise.

Mafuyu's fair skin had turned even paler.

"What's..... wrong?"

My voice was higher by an octave due to my nervousness.

"..... I'm fine."

"How does that look fine! Can you stand?"

"I can't. But..... I'm really okay."

Mafuyu brushed my hand away and tried sitting up. However, her shoulders lost balance immediately, and her right leg was paralyzed. After seeing how her body had twisted into a strange position, I propped up her upper body and leaned her against the wall.

"Why have things turned out like this....." Mafuyu began sobbing. She turned her





head away to avoid looking at me, and murmured, "Why? I have already forced myself to forget everything, so why did you make me remember again?"

What is she talking about? I really have no clue.

I removed my bass from my shoulders. The strings seemed to have brushed into something, and a low-pitched tone rang through the small classroom. Mafuyu's left hand twitched a little.

"Stop! Stop it! Don't make it play any sound!"

Mafuyu was possessed by a sudden surge of strength - she snatched the bass away from my hands, and slammed it forcibly onto the ground. One of the knobs on the bass fell off from the main body. There was a loud horrifying sound akin to a pair of claws scratching against the walls.

Mafuyu collapsed onto the bass and the guitar that were lying on the floor, just like a marionette that had its strings cut. The amplifiers were persistently giving off a disharmonious sound which was similar to wailing voices, but I had no idea how to stop those sounds. Now what? Why have things turned out this way? What should I do? In any case—







I should head to the infirmary first. Amid the sharp shrieking sounds of the feedback, I finally managed to come up with that.

"I'll get the school nurse."

"I don't want that—"

Mafuyu moaned. What the hell is that idiot saying at a time like this? I immediately sprinted towards the main building.

Just as I was about to dash into the infirmary, I almost crashed into Miss Kumiko, who is the school nurse. Miss Kumiko is very young, and it is said that she used to be a delinquent, which felt quite scary. And the first thing she did was to actually grab me by the collar and yell "Don't run in the corridors!", before realizing something and releasing her grip.

"You're from the Third Class of First Year, right? The same class as Ebisawa Mafuyu?"

I was breathless from my run, and could not speak as a result. I barely nodded my head in reply.

"Did you see her in the classroom? She should have an appointment with the hospital today, but the hospital just called and said she hasn't arrived yet."

She should be going to the hospital today?

Friday. The only day which Mafuyu will head home immediately after school. Hospital. I was shocked. As I tried to regulate my breathes, I gasped, "Mafuyu....."





"Fainted."

"Where is she?" Miss Kumiko's voice was still calm, but there was a change in the expressions of her eyes.

"Courtyard—"

Miss Kumiko quickly grabbed a few medication from the rack, then grabbed my arm and rushed out of the infirmary. When we returned to the courtyard, we saw Chiaki squatting next to the crumbling Mafuyu. Why..... is Chiaki here? Could it be that she was waiting for our showdown to be over?

"Aikawa, please step aside."

I'll administer some first-aid, and then I'll call someone — I stared blankly at Miss Kumiko's actions, while Chiaki was looking at me helplessly.

"What in the world happened?"

I could only shake my head in response to Chiaki's questions.

"What in the world have you guys done for things to have turned out like this....."
Miss Kumiko glared at me as she checked Mafuyu's pulse.

"We..... were just playing the guitar."

"That's all? How can that be? There shouldn't be a problem for her to play a musical instrument."

Miss Kumiko — she knew about Mafuyu's condition?





"In any case, I've asked her father to head over. He said he'd be here soon."

Mafuyu's left shoulder trembled slightly. She slowly leaned herself towards the side of Chiaki's legs, and lifted her face which was filled with a pained expression.

"No..... I don't want that."

"What are you talking about? You should be reporting to the hospital today, no? Do you have any intention of treating your illness at all? You can't get careless! Your body's condition is different from that of an ordinary person, so we'll have to ask the doctor in charge of you to come down as well....."

Mafuyu shook her head as tears fell from her eyes,

"No. I don't want..... to be seen by 'that person' in my current state."

Miss Kumiko ignored her protests, and turned around to speak to me, "Describe what happened in greater detail. Aihara, please get the cushions over there and prop it under Mafuyu."

I had only seen Ebisawa Chisato via the photographs. Despite that, even though I was of some considerable distance away, I saw the two men in suits at the parking lot walking in our direction - and I knew immediately that the one leading the way was Mafuyu's father.

"What in the world happened?"

The same stupid question which was asked by a certain someone came out from Ebisawa Chisato's mouth as well. His hair was combed neatly and well greased,





although there's a bit of white hair mixed in. His stern and well defined contours were clearly showing his anger. Miss Maki came to the courtyard on the call of Miss Kumiko. After seeing her arrived, he immediately started to rage,

"To think such a thing has happened even with you around her! What will you do should something happen to Mafuyu!"

"You can't expect me to be by her side all the time, right?" Miss Maki replied coldly. The middle-aged doctor (he should be a doctor?) who came along were standing next to the emotional Ebichiri, and was telling Miss Kumiko to 'carry the lady to the car' via his eyes.

"What's with you not going to the hospital? Who are you sticking around with?"

I turned my my eyes away, and had even wondered if I should just run away from that place.

"Guitar? You said guitar? Are you joking, who allowed you to play that sort of thing? Mafuyu, what are you trying to do by learning the guitar behind my back? Do you not know how important your fingers are? You may never get to play the piano—"

"Maestro Ebisawa! Please! Don't corner Mafuyu like that!"

Miss Maki said that with a painful voice.

"I did not send her to high school so that she could play things like that!"

I bit onto my lips as I listened to the piercing roars of Ebichiri. The doctor and father then stuffed Mafuyu into the backseat like she was a bagged corpse. There was nothing I could do, other than to watch everything in silence.





Just before the doors of the car closed, Mafuyu and I exchanged sights. The expressions of her eyes were the same as that of back then - they could not make a single sound, and could only seek desperately on something to depend on - those eyes were like the skies just before a downpour, filled with dark grey clouds. No, I can't let her go like that. I could almost hear some sort of whisper right next to my ears, but I could not say a single word, nor could I move a single step.

I wasn't too sure what happened after that. I was probably brutally scolded by either Miss Maki or Miss Kumiko? Perhaps the reason for me not remembering much of the details was because neither of them was willing to tell me what happened to Mafuyu. The only thing I remembered was that I said not a single word. Chiaki was the one who answered almost all the questions in my stead.

It was already past six when I got back home, and the speakers in the living room were playing Messiaen's <[Catalogue d'oiseaux](#)>. Quails, nightingale and even blackbird - just a single piano is enough to weave out the cries of the various birds. Tetsurou's lying on his side on the sofa and listening to the music while sipping on a glass of whiskey. [TLNote: The piece is translated as <Bird catalogue>]

"You're back..... What's wrong? You look quite bad, you know? Did something happen?"

I shook my head weakly, and threw my bass onto the carpet after removing it from my shoulders. I sank myself into the sofa.

Despite Tetsurou being someone who's extremely slow, there are some occasions where he will notice my feelings without the need for words. At such a time, the best course of action would be to leave me alone and make dinner himself — which was





exactly what he had done.

On the dining table were some sort of burnt meat, as well as salad drenched in dressing. All I ate was a few sips of the tasteless miso soup.

"Hey..... Nao....."

"Hmm?"

"You didn't complain, so perhaps the food I've cooked today is actually decent?"

"No, don't you worry, it sucks as usual. I'm full."

Tetsurou was visibly saddened by my tsukkomi, but I left him alone and returned to the living room. I holed myself in the sofa and continued listening to the cries of the birds. I had a sudden urge to cry.

So Mafuyu had been waiting for me.

She should have gone to the hospital today, but just because of the things that I said yesterday — the me who knew nothing but said idiotic things like 'Let's have a showdown on Friday'. Because of that, she had been waiting — she was waiting for me.

The song of the birds had ended. Tetsurou removed the apron from his body and sat on the sofa opposite of me. He then silently poured some whiskey into his glass. In a situation like this, I would be really grateful if he don't ask me any questions about what happened.

"Oh right, Tetsurou....."





"Hmm?"

"I think..... it should be a piano concerto..... It's made up of three movements, and the middle movement is a march. You heard before something like this?"

I hummed out the piece which Mafuyu played at the junkyard to Tetsurou.

"— That should be Ravel's piano concerto....." Tetsurou mumbled halfway into the tune.

I felt a chill running down my spine.

"..... Which?"

Maurice Ravel had only written two piano concertos in his entire life. The first is a piano concerto in G major, written for his own playing. The other is—

"The one in D major," Tetsurou replied. That's the answer that I had missed.

The other piano concerto in D major was written for Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein. Paul lost what is dubbed as 'a pianist's life' - his right arm, during the First World War. As such, the piano concerto that is written for him is also known as—

"<[Piano Concerto for the Left Hand](#)>."

Why didn't I notice that sooner?

There were lots of signs — Mafuyu had never used chopsticks, and she didn't copy notes in class. Regardless of the arts class or during physical education, she did nothing at all. There's also that strangely shaped guitar pick — with the index and





middle finger slotting through the two rings, even a person without any grip in his hands can easily secure the pick between his fingertips.

That's the reason she chose the guitar.

The fingers on Mafuyu's right hand..... they probably could no longer move. It's only till now that I finally realized that fact. A certain cruel fate has robbed Mafuyu's piano career away from her, but despite all that, she still could not run away from the music that she loved the most. Therefore, she was grabbing onto the guitar with all her might, just like a drowning person would do to a piece of floating wood.

Why didn't I notice that earlier? Even if no one else took notice of it..... I should have found that answer!

Why—

Why did she not tell me anything about it? The dense me knew nothing at all, and I had even acted like a kid by insisting on challenging Mafuyu to guitar showdown. I forced her to stay back, but in the end I had actually harmed her unknowingly.

I really don't know, because Mafuyu said nothing to me at all! I really wanted to find an adult whom I can voice out my excuse to, but Tetsurou and the bass casing on the floor were both silent. I recalled the <Eroica Variations> which I played together with Mafuyu, and the fugue which was disrupted halfway. What sort of feelings was Mafuyu experiencing as she listened to the ensemble which she could no longer play by herself, and watched on as someone else played the melody in replacement of her immobile right hand?

Why do we always fail in successfully converting the feelings within us into words?





June arrived a week later. Mafuyu had really disappeared - she will no longer come to school.

All of my classmates were discussing something: something seemed to have happened on the Friday before the break. My classmates had always ignored what others say, and they cared nothing about the mood of others either - but just this once, they didn't ask me anything.

"Because Nao looks really depressed....." Chiaki said that to me softly during lunch break.

"Depressed? No?" I wove a lie.

"I even went to ask Miss Maki about it."

Chiaki was surprisingly low on her appetite. She actually did not take anything from my bento.

"It seems like Ebisawa's father wants to go back to America. I think there are specialists there, so it will be more convenient for them to checkup on her or to go for an operation..... I am not too sure about the details as well, but it seems like Ebisawa will be going along as well."

"..... Really."

So that's what she meant by 'I'll be disappearing in June'?

Which means, Mafuyu will never come back again? So that's why she wanted us to forget everything.....





Therefore — I no longer had a chance to apologize to her, nor do I have the chance to smile at her. I can no longer make her angry or scare her with the image of a zombie, and it's even more impossible for me to ask her to help tune my bass anymore.

If I knew right from the start that she will really be disappearing - if I knew what she said will turn out to be true - then I would have just forgotten all about her, and that will be it.

According to Chiaki, Kagurazaka-senpai has not been to school for some reason as well. Did that person also feel responsible for what happened to Mafuyu? That can't be!

"Will she be coming back after her checkups....." Chiaki mumbled. I began to feel that nothing matters anymore. I'm the one who wreaked everything and misunderstood her totally. I had always thought that Mafuyu would tell me something special, but in reality there exists a wall between us which is way thicker than that of the door of the practice classroom, to the point where no sounds can pass through. I could not help but feel how wonderful music is - despite us being so far away from each other, just by playing whatever was written on the scores, I had the hallucination that Mafuyu was right next to me. What a wonderful power that is! Disappear from my sight right now.

When I returned home, I took the bass to the recycling center and dumped it there. It seemed like a connection was wreaked somewhere when Mafuyu slammed the bass on the floor, and it could no longer play any sound. I turned the knobs to their maximum, and had even tried to dismantle and reassemble them again, but none of that worked. It is possible for me to repair that with my skills, but I was honestly not in the mood to do that.





Even upon seeing that scene, Tetsurou did not crack jokes like 'As expected of my son, you've given up really quickly' or 'Just be a virgin for life', and had even prepared me a (extremely disgusting) dinner. I can always say pointless things like these easily, but I just can't voice out the important feelings within me.

After dinner, I sat right opposite of Tetsurou who was working on his articles, and hugged my knees. I could hear the speakers playing the <[Hungarian Dances](#)> softly next to my ears.

"..... Tetsurou, have you heard?"

"Hmm? Ah, mmm."

Tetsurou replied without lifting his gaze away from the laptop,

"I heard something from a paparazzi who claims to be the hear-it-all in the music circle. You want to know about it?"

"Is it about..... Mafuyu's right hand?"

"So you do know!"

"..... But I knew nothing!"

I realized everything only when nothing could be salvaged anymore. Tetsurou pushed the laptop to the side. He then looked at me and said, "It was probably last year? Seems like the fingers on her right hand were suddenly immobile just before she was about to start her concert in England. The concert was canceled, and they went to quite a few hospitals, but they couldn't find out the reason behind it. Back then, there were some who said that it might be due to obsessive-compulsive





disorder."

I remembered the frightened look in Mafuyu's eyes, and I suddenly thought: could that be related to her father?

"That's the reason why she returned to Japan. It's thought that a brief break from piano and some rehabilitation could perhaps be the key to her recovery. But things don't seem to be that optimistic, do they! Her condition is getting worse and worse, and she had to go to the doctors for frequent checkups."

I could feel a sense of pain near my heart. So that's what Mafuyu was so desperately trying to hide. She chased away any classmates who tried getting close to her, and was unwilling to approach anyone either; she was pretty successful in being someone who's really annoying. Moreover, all those who tried to get close to her are idiots, so no one had noticed that there was something wrong with her right fingers.

Could we really do nothing about that?

I really hoped someone would tell me 'It's all your fault!' or 'It's actually not your fault' straight to my face without any hesitation. However, upon hearing me say that, Tetsurou replied coldly,

"How the heck would I know? Think about it yourself!"

All I could do is hug my head in desperation.

"..... Tetsurou, what are you thinking of when you are telling me these things?"

The question was so damn stupid, to the point where even I couldn't stand it. Therefore, I dared not look at Tetsurou after asking that.





"Nothing? Just feels that it's a bit of a shame that I will no longer get to hear her playing the piano. I really hope she can at least record the <[French Suites](#)> in its entirety! But to me, she is just one of the many thousands of pianists."

If only I could think as he does, wouldn't it be much easier for me?

"— But that's not the case for you, right?"

I lifted my head to look at him. Tetsurou shot me a glance that said 'Idiot, why else would you ask me that?', then directed his attention back to his article.

After returning to my room on the second floor, I squeezed right into my bed without even changing into my pajamas. I closed my eyes, and planned to forget everything, just as Mafuyu had requested.

That should be easily done. I have absolute confidence in my poor memory, and within months, I will definitely forget that a person named Mafuyu had ever existed, and I won't remember anything that had to do with the bass. I'll return to the life where I kill time by immersing myself in the music of others.

If only I didn't notice the sound of my windows being knocked on by someone two days later.





Chapter 15

Layla, Railroads, Everything that was Lost

Do you still remember?





At then, I was in my room listening to music with my headphones. It's the album of Derek and the Dominos. That was a Thursday night, the third day since Mafuyu missed school. The wind outside were very strong, and I could hear the rustling of branches of the trees at the side of the walkway.

Tetsurou was summoned by the publisher, so there's no one at home. Normally speaking, I'd be free to use the sound systems in the living room at a time like this, but I was just too lazy to get out of my room, and so I continued lying on my bed, listening to the mini sound system which produces sounds that lack depth.

The sounds of Jim Gordon's drums from the speakers were drowning out all the other sounds, so I did not notice that sound at the beginning. It was until the middle portion of the [song](#) where the melody of the piano began to flow, that I finally realized — there's the sound of the windows being knocked on by someone behind it.

I naturally thought it was Chiaki, because there's no one else who'd be doing things like that. It's late into the night already, so what does she want? However, I was stunned as I saw a pair of blue eyes after pulling open the curtains and the window.

The person who was standing on the roof that was extending outwards and opposite of the window was actually Mafuyu. It is indeed her. Her maroon colored hair were blown up by the strong winds, and they were tangled with the guitar case she had on her back.

"You....."

I wanted to say something, but I could not say anything out successfully.

"Can I come in?"

Mafuyu said that expressionlessly as she removed the guitar from her shoulder and





passed it to me.

"Eh..... Ah, mmm, okay."

My mind was in a mess, but I still took the guitar case and leaned it against the wall. Despite me being in shock, I remembered offering Mafuyu a hand and pulling her in after she had removed her shoes and had climbed in through the window. The her then was wearing the fluttering blue dress which she wore when we first met..... though it seemed difficult to move about in it.

I still could not believe it. Is this the continuation of some sort of dream somewhere?

"..... Really?"

As I looked at Mafuyu in my room, I could not help but to ask.

"What?"

"Eh, no, it's just..... a little strange. You should not be able to climb up, right?" And her right hand can't move either.

"My wrists can still move."

Mafuyu answered nonchalantly, and moved her wrists about for me to see. Forget about her wrists - even her elbows were filled with scratches. So what she's saying is that her fingers are the only areas where she can't move freely, and she can still barely climb up to here? Even so.....

Mafuyu noticed me staring at her, and thus she turned her head and said softly,

"I've heard Aihara talking about it in school, about how she can enter and exit your





room freely through the window by climbing up the tree. I somehow feel..... a little envious, and so I thought I should try it."

Even so.....

"Why—" are you appearing at a place like this? That was a simple question aimed straight at the crux of the matter, but I somehow could not bring myself to ask it. Perhaps it's because I thought she would disappear the moment I asked it out loud?

In the end, what I said was this,

"How do you know where my house is?" Mafuyu stared at me for a long while, before walking to her guitar case. She took out something from within and passed it to me.

"..... John Lennon?" It was a CD - the <Rock 'n' Roll> album which I listened to on the roof that day. Mafuyu opened up the CD case nimbly with her left hand. There was a piece of folded paper on top of the shining silver disk. Upon opening it, I could see a map so well drawn, I almost did not notice it was done by hand. It had precisely listed out the landmarks near my house in detail. What the heck is that.....

"That person' had instructed me to stay at home and to not go anywhere." Mafuyu said. That person? She should be referring to her father. "And so before I went to the hospital, I could not get out of the house. Just as I was about to head home after the checkup, the CD somehow appeared in my bag without me knowing it."

I looked at Mafuyu's face half in confusion. She tilted her head in response.

"Isn't it you? Who stalked me to the hospital, and then placed this....."

"Who will do that sort of stupid....."





I swallowed my words while I was halfway into the sentence. There is someone who would do that sort of stupid things — someone who would do things in a roundabout manner without hesitation even though she had no idea if it would succeed, and will not bat an eyelid even if she wasted half her day and a huge amount of effort into doing so.....

"It's Kagurazaka-senpai....."

So that's what she was doing when she skipped school..... Speaking of which, what exactly is she planning? Is there something which she wants Mafuyu to do, for her to tell Mafuyu the location of my house?

"You mean that senpai who has really long hair, eyes like a panther's, and always says all sort of strange things?" That's what Mafuyu said. I see, so it's not like Mafuyu had no idea who Kagurazaka-senpai is, huh?

"Mmm..... Should be."

"About that senpai, I've always....." Just as Mafuyu started to speak, she noticed my gaze and flinched in shock. She turned her head away and shook it fervently, "No, nothing."

Mafuyu walked back to my bed and sat on it, resulting in me being in a situation where I could neither get close to my bed nor run out of the room - all I could do is to lean myself next to the window. Mafuyu's in my room right now — to be honest, I am still not too sure of what is happening, but — Mafuyu really is here.

"Look..... Urm....." I chose my words carefully, "I don't know..... back then..... Therefore..... I'm sorry."





"You don't know what?"

"No, it's..... the thing..... about your right hand."

"You don't have to apologize to me. I will feel bad if you apologize."

I don't feel that great either!

"Moreover..... you did nothing wrong."

With that, she turned her face away.

"That is not your fault. Those things will happen occasionally. The right side of my body will gradually become immobile all of the sudden, and sometimes I cannot even move my legs. I don't quite understand why either."

For a while, I could not speak. The right side of her body gradually becoming immobile?

"Why..... can you say it as though it has got nothing to do with you?"

"Because..... it doesn't feel like it has anything to do with me."

Mafuyu lowered her head and showed a slight smile. That was the first time I saw her smile, but it was such a lonely expression. My heart ached a little.

"And I don't really care if it really can't move. However, that person and the records company may be slightly more troubled by that."

"Ah! Urm..... well..... aren't you going to America? I heard you will be going there for a checkup or an operation?"





"Mmm. That person will be doing a tour around America, so he'll be taking a flight tomorrow."

"T-Then the reason for you coming here at this time....."

"Mmm, I ran away."

I gave a loud sigh. She ran away? Then again, this lass seems to be a repeated offender of running away from home, yeah?

"That is what I had planned anyway. I'll run away on the night before I am about to be brought to America. It's just my right hand - I don't really care if it can't be treated. I just want to bring my guitar and run away to a place far, far away, until my legs can no longer move....."

Mafuyu closed her eyes tightly, as though she was trying her hardest not to let her tears fall.

'I'll be disappearing in June anyway.'

So that's what she meant by that — it's not because she will be going to America to seek treatment, but because she had already decided on running away from it.

And then?

I forcibly swallowed that question back into my throat.

She'll be running to a place far, far away. And then? What will she be doing after that?





I knew Mafuyu would definitely be unable to answer that question - even if the question was directed at me, I wouldn't have the slightest idea on how to answer. Human beings will not think that much after they have decided to run away from something. They will only run desperately, and try to seek a place where they can hide in—

"..... Why did you look for me?"

"Because....." Mafuyu stared at my fingers, then suddenly lifted her head, "Because you said before, that I should honestly say whatever that is troubling me. Do you still remember?"

I did say something like that before. Back then, Mafuyu even wanted me to chop off my right hand to give it to her; either that or I turn back time to the period before she had started playing the piano— Ah! So that's what everything is about. Man, I feel like crying even more now.

So Mafuyu had already told me about it! It was I who didn't realize it earlier.

"So....."

It seemed like Mafuyu was having trouble continuing on with that sentence. She lowered her head yet again.

"Currently, my hand..... is unable to carry any luggage. Therefore..... together....." Upon saying that, Mafuyu closed her eyes once again, and shook her head fervently.

"Sorry, pretend I never said that."

Mafuyu suddenly stood up and walked right next to me. She carried her guitar, and just as she was about to take her shoes and climb out of the window, I called out to





her without hesitation,

"Wait!"

Mafuyu turned around. I was unable to speak yet again as she stared right into me, and the words that I was originally planning to say had crumbled inside my mouth. Instead, what I asked was something unrelated and stupid - "Do you want to leave via the main door?"

"There's no one else in the house?"

"He's out. May be still a while before he's back."

"I see. But that was my first time climbing the trees, and I thought it was quite fun."

Problem is, the expressions on Mafuyu's face suggested otherwise. No wait, that's not what I meant!

"..... Alright. Do you have any other luggage? Or did you leave them downstairs?"

Mafuyu kept staring at my face, and blinked her eyes in confusion.

"..... What?"

"I'm coming along."

Mafuyu's not-too-big backpack was placed beneath the tree in the courtyard. On it hung the recorder which I had helped to repair, though I almost forgot about the time I did it.





"Are you really coming along with me"

"You are the one who wants me to come along!"

"So it is, but..... why?"

I don't know either. I don't even know where to go next.

All I know is: I cannot allow Mafuyu to leave by herself.

I took the backpack and carried it on my shoulders. It's light.

"Right, where's your bass? I only saw an empty casing in your room."

Mafuyu suddenly asked that question while we were in the dark courtyard.

"I threw it away."

"..... Why? Ah....."

Mafuyu suddenly gave a shriek.

"I-Is it because of that time? I-I can't quite remember it clearly, but did it break because I slammed it.....?"

"Nah, it's not that. Even if it is not broken, I'll probably throw it away too." That was my reply, and it was no lie either. If I wanted to, I will definitely be able to fix it. Moreover, I don't want Mafuyu to be think that it was her fault.

"..... Why?" Mafuyu became even more depressed.





Why huh? I sank into my thoughts for a brief moment.

"Because..... I don't like it anymore."

"Don't you like rock?"

That direct question which lacked any compassion had caused quite a headache for me.

"It is quite interesting in the beginning, and it felt great when I practiced. However....."

I shut my mouth. Why did I throw it away in the end? I can't quite explain it myself.

"..... Ah, if it is because..... because of me back then....."

I shook my head and interrupted Mafuyu.

"Let's go quickly. Tetsurou may be back anytime soon."

Mafuyu's face was masked by the darkness of the night, and because of that I was unable to see the expressions on her face clearly. Somehow, it just felt like the expressions she has right now should be a lonely one, right?

I pushed Mafuyu out of the door, and carried her guitar on my back.

"Where are we going?"

"Where do you think we should go?"





Mafuyu and I exchanged such stupid questions.

The two of us began walking at the same time. We passed by the desolated street of the residential area which was illuminated by only a few street lights, and made our way towards the train station.

Our runaway plan suffered a huge setback - the last train had already left. The small train station stood there by its lonesome in the middle of the residential area, and there's only a convenient store nearby that operates late into the night. There was no one to be seen after the train left. As we stood on the surprisingly wide walkway, what accompanied us were our shadows spreading outwards and away from us due the the street lights around us.

"What should we do?" I asked in desperation.

"Are we not going to look for a corpse along the railroad?"

That was something I randomly said some time ago, and Mafuyu really used it against me.

"We are really gonna walk? It will be really tough!"

And what should I do if your right leg becomes immobile like how it had back then?

"I heard that freezing is the most beautiful way to die. Is that true?"

"You can't freeze to death in Japan in June, alright? Moreover, I've been feeling that something is out of place ever since just now....."





"What?"

"Why am I the one carrying your guitar and bag as well?"

I forgot when did the guitar came on my back, but it is really heavy.

"Because you are the one in charge carrying all the luggage!"

"That's not....." No wait, come to think of it, it really is so?

I looked at Mafuyu walking in the direction of the railroad, and caught up to her. That sight of her in the pale colored dress seemed like it would melt into the darkness and disappear if I was not careful.

After going past the wired fencing, the dark railroad was right beside us. As we walked up the gentle slopes, Mafuyu asked me about my mother out of the blue.

"Because your father always talks about the divorce in his critiques."

Damn Tetsurou, he should seriously think about his stand as a music critic.

"Do you still remember your mother?" Mafuyu turned her head and asked.

"Of course. I was already in elementary school when they divorced, and we would still meet up once a month."

"What sort of person is she?"

"A really serious person, to the point where I fail to understand why she would do something as stupid as to marry to Tetsurou. She is very particular about table manners as well."





"I see....." Mafuyu once again turned her sight back onto the railroad before her.

Speaking of which, Mafuyu's living with her father after the separation of her parents as well. So that's the reason for her asking me that?

"My Mama....." Mafuyu continued on as she looked forward, and her footsteps seemed to be slowing down as she walked on absentmindedly. "She's no longer around even before I was in the elementary school. However, I heard she has remarried to a German, and they are now living in Bonn. I even looked up for her address last year, as I was passing by Bonn during my Europe tour."

She probably got herself lost? I thought to myself.

"However, Mama refused to see me. Her husband came to the door, and in a very polite English, he asked me to go back."

Mafuyu stopped in her tracks, and placed her immobile right fingers onto the wired fence, before leaning her forehead against it as well. As I could not see her face, I had no idea if the trembling of her shoulders were due to her crying.

"That person said I looked exactly like Mama, and so Mama may have refused to see me because she was afraid that she might be affected by it. Moreover, Mama's a pianist as well....."

Mafuyu finally turned her head, but there was almost no expressions on her face.

"The day after that, we took off to London, and my fingers suddenly could not move right before the performance. But I..... should not have cared about that at all—"

As she continued on endlessly, she grabbed onto her right arm tightly with her left





fingers.

"Even if my right body gradually become unable to move, followed by my left body, and finally my heart stops beating and I die; as long as I am mummified and sent to that person, he will definitely put me right before the piano automatically, and be pleased with that."

"..... Don't say such uncomfortable things."

Mafuyu ignored my words, and resumed walking.

A few of the questions which I had always dared not ask her suddenly appeared in my mind. Since Mafuyu may plan to just disappear, I had decided to seek answers to all of my questions.

"Do you hate your father?"

Mafuyu did not answer me immediately. She was two steps in front of me, but she slowed down by dragging her feet along.

"I have never felt that way."

Mafuyu's voice gently landed on the asphalt, and rolled right next to my feet.

"It's not about me hating him or not..... It's just like me being stuck in a bottomless swamp, helpless and all alone."

"What's with that! Just say you hate him if you really do!"

Mafuyu jumped in shock, and turned her head around after she stopped her footsteps. I flinched at my own voice as well, but as of now I could no longer pretend nothing





had happened by keeping my mouth shut.

"..... Why do you sound like you know everything?"

"Because it's painfully obvious! You don't like your father! Why do you have to make it so complicated? Since the divorce of my parents, I've said that to Tetsurou multiple times as well: 'You moronic heartless creature, I hate you the most! Not only have you caused me to lose my mother, my father has died too! Thank god not all of my family members are dead'."

Mafuyu glared at me with her face flushed red, and her hair was trembling slightly as well. She then turned away hastily, and continued walking forward.

Am I really qualified to say that sort of things? I could not help but think to myself after Mafuyu had shifted her gaze away from my face. After readjusting the strap of the guitar case which was about to slip off my shoulders, I quickly caught up with Mafuyu yet again.

After walking a distance of about four train stations apart, Mafuyu began complaining that her feet hurts. As such, we walked into a small park next to the railroad, and took a rest on the bench. There's only a small sand pit, two see-saws and a bench in the park. Such a lonely space this is.

"Does your right foot hurts?"

"No, it's both. It has nothing to do with that."

Seems like it's just due to us walking for too long. As for me, I was quite thankful for the chance to rest, as the strap of the guitar casing was already digging itself deep





into my shoulder.

I lifted my head to look at the starless gloomy skies, and suddenly a serious question hit me — what the heck am I doing at a place like this deep in the middle of the night? What do I plan to do next? I shook my head, stared at my feet, and decided to just forget about that question for now.

"My legs always tire easily, and they cramp up frequently."

If so, what's with the deal of searching for a corpse along the railway!

"..... Ah, so that's the reason you don't step on the pedals when you play the piano?"

"That has nothing to do with this. In the first place, there's no need to step on the pedals when playing Bach."

"That's not what I meant. I feel that you can portray the sustained notes very well even without the use of the pedals."

"Did you listen to my CD that much?"

"Because people will send them over to Tetsurou. I've probably listened to every single album of yours that is released."

"Disgusting."

That's played by you, so what's with the 'disgusting'!?

"It will be great if they can burn all the pieces in the world which was played by me."

Just don't record them if you don't like it?





"So you don't like the piano, but you are forced to play it?"

Mafuyu nodded.

"I had never once thought that playing the piano is something enjoyable."

"But you sound like you were having fun when you were playing Chopin's
<[Butterfly](#)>?"

"The critics always love to guess the feelings of the musicians - I sometimes do wonder if they are idiots or something. I can still play a happy piece even if I am not feeling so!"

Well..... you're not wrong to say that.

Music is but a series of arranged notes. It's up to the listeners to interpret the feelings that are hidden within.

"So you started hating the piano, and you don't wish to play it anymore?"

"I can no longer play it anyway. I can only move my thumb and my index finger freely."

Mafuyu lifted her right hand and tried to open up her fingers. Her middle, ring and little finger were bent weakly.

"If you are to do a diagnosis and then proceed with the operation....." Perhaps there will be a chance for you to recover?

"That is why I am running away."





Mafuyu placed her right hand on her chest. She then covered it with her left hand, as if she was trying to protect it.

"That person said that his dream is to play Beethoven's <[Piano Concerto No. 2](#)>. I have always been thinking - why No. 2? That is not a popular piece to begin with."

Beethoven had written five piano concertos. Recent research has pointed out that Piano Concerto No. 2 in B \flat major was actually released earlier than No. 1, and it's the least played piece among all his piano concerto.

"I've only realized later after searching for the past records, that he had played the other concertos with Mama, and has recorded it down as well."

That's—

I shut my opened mouth.

I originally wanted to say "That's just you thinking too much into it", but I really could not bring myself to say it.

"And..... I don't think my hand can be treated anyway. That's what I think."

Using her left arm, she clutched onto the wrist of her right hand tightly.

"I'm made just to play the piano with that person. Once I give up on the piano, it is obvious that I will not be able to move. That's natural."

"Then why are you playing the guitar?"

Mafuyu's shoulder flinched as she looked on the ground.





"And you just play the pieces that you had played on the piano before! Do you really hate the piano?"

Mafuyu bit on her bottom lips as she searched for an answer. She then closed her eyes and sighed.

"Originally..... Back when I first played <[Hungarian Dance](#)> together with Mama with our four hands, I felt really happy. I was only four back then, and we would always place this on the piano, and record the pieces we played."

Mafuyu traced out the contours of the sound recorder which was hanging from her bag with her fingers.

So that is really something left by her mother. And she did say before that it is something important.

"But that's only for the beginning. I learnt how to play everything later on, but Mama is no longer around, and I am left all alone. All that is left next to me is the piano. After I am done with a piece, the score for the next will appear right before me. I hoped that I could perhaps use the guitar to get the same feeling back then, and I was quite immersed in it at the beginning, but....."

She hugged her knees on the bench, and leaned her forehead against her knees. There was an unmistakable depression in her voice.







"But I became more and more breathless as I played, and yet it felt painful if I don't. I really don't know what to do. My head was filled with the memories of that person wanting me to play this and that, so what was I feeling when I was playing the piano before all that? I can no longer remember, and perhaps I have already forgotten them somewhere already. Those memories will never come back to me, because I had already lost it all a long long time ago. I can no longer..... get them back."

I unconsciously closed my eyes. All I could hear was the painful voice of Mafuyu.

Can she..... really not get them back? If so, then is there really nothing that I can do for Mafuyu?

"..... It's because you have been alone for too long. You will not be able to continue on the path of music like that."

Just then, I remembered the answer from a certain famous mystery novel. Will there be a sound if someone is to collapse in a desolated forest? The answer is no. If it does not get into the ears of someone, the sound cannot be considered as a sound, but rather the vibration of air.

"I too have learned that from Chiaki and Senpai. So....."

I suddenly didn't know what I was supposed to say. What the heck am I talking about? I am the one who gave up! I knew that will only hurt Mafuyu, but I still tossed it away and planned to ignore everything, didn't I?

"Have you..... really decided to join the band of that senpai?"

"Eh? Ah..... mmm."

Right. The bullshit about snatching back the ownership of the practice room and the





dignity of rock no longer mattered midway. All I wanted is to start a band with Mafuyu. If only I could be like senpai and just tell her honestly right from the start.....

"I wanted to ask you into the Folk Music Research Club if I won. The four of us can then practice together as a band in that classroom."

"Forming a band..... I've never thought of things like that."

The expressions in Mafuyu's eyes were just as if she was trying to send off the migratory birds that were flying away in late autumn. I could not help but to direct my gaze away.

"Sorry. I was too hot-headed when I forced you to join that whatever showdown. It just feels..... like I had caused you to remember those unhappy memories."

"No!" Mafuyu suddenly shouted. "Nothing of that sort. At that time..... I actually could remember slightly about the days when I used to play the piano happily. Also, <Eroica Variations> is one my favorite pieces. The sounds of your bass was exceptional - it's just like it had fused together with my guitar as a single instrument. That was the first time I experienced those sort of feelings. It was just like magic."

I couldn't help but to slump my head. If I buy back the same bass, and do the same modifications to it again, will it be able to produce the same sounds as back then? That's impossible. A mere millimeter of difference and the slight change in the voltage will result in miles of differences in the sounds that are produced. That ensemble can be considered to be in the realms of a miracle.

"That was really like magic. Perhaps that's what playing as a band is all about?"

"Mmm, I had slight thought about it back when I was playing <Eroica Variations>. If





felt like my right hand had became normal again, and it was as though I had went back in time to when I was playing the piano together with Mama. If that is the magic of a band..... then I wish to be part of it too."

"If so.....?" I lifted my head and looked at her.

The tears at the corner of her eyes were reflecting the rays from the street lights.

"But I just can't do it. Things like forming a band with other people....."

"You can't? Why!"

Mafuyu shook her head furiously, as if she was using her forehead to grind on her knees.

"I can't. Because I will definitely ruin everything."

"What are you talking—"

"Didn't you throw it away? It's because I broke it....."

Mafuyu murmured. I could only swallow back the words that were about to come out of my mouth, and gripped hard on my arms.

"I don't quite understand myself..... why I did that back then."

Back then, Mafuyu took my bass and slammed it hard against the floor.

"It's all that bass' fault for making me recall so many things. I had already erased all those memories from within me! Because..... it's really..... painful....."





Mafuyu barely restrained herself from saying the words in her mouth. She gripped onto her right wrist tightly with her left hand. Perhaps I should cup my ears or something?

At last, she heaved a light sigh.

"..... I'm sorry."

There was no need for Mafuyu to apologize. I shook my head.

"I am the one who ruined everything. It's true..... I can't walk on alone by myself."

She hugged her knees, and buried her face into them.

"And there's no point in me saying all these. Your bass will no longer come back, and I am already....."

Mafuyu voice was stifled.

I really do not wish to hear her saying such things. Moreover, I did not follow along just so I could listen to those words from her.

What I can do—

Just one sentence flowed out from my mouth—

"It will not disappear just like that. Let's get it back together."

Mafuyu slowly lifted her head to look at me. Her eyes seemed a little puffy.

"..... What?"





"To get back my bass, that's what - the one that I threw away. I will be able to play it once I repair it."

"B-But....."

Mafuyu sniffed.

"When did you throw it away? It should have been collected by someone, right?"

"The day before yesterday. It's taken away by the garbage truck."

"Do you know where it was taken to?"

"How would I know? That's why we are going to look for it!"

I stood up, but Mafuyu was still hugging onto her knees and looking at me with the helpless gaze of hers.

We'll definitely find it.





Chapter 16

Lucille, The First Drops of Rain

Where are we going?





We waited until dawn before taking the first train. The skies looked as if it was about to rain - despite it being morning, the skies were still grey.

"Hey, you should be going to school, right?"

Mafuyu asked while we were sitting in the wobbling train.

"Skipping it. Doesn't really matter if it's only for a day."

Moreover, I've already skipped plenty of lessons due to all sorts of reasons, but I decided not to tell her about it.

"Did you leave a message for your father?"

"Nope. But I don't think he cares much about me disappearing as long as there's breakfast in the fridge."

"But....."

She herself is a runaway girl, but Mafuyu was surprisingly caring towards others.

"Look, you're the one who asked me to leave with you! Why are you still worried about things like that?"

"..... I thought you did it on a whim yesterday, and that you would return today."

So she was actually looking down on me.

"You are the one who's really running away from home! Your father is probably looking all over for you right now, yeah? Moreover you're a repeat offender....."





Mafuyu shook her head.

"There will be a performance tomorrow. That person should probably be heading down to the airport already."

"That can't be, right? We're talking about his daughter disappearing....."

"But for that person or the band, it'll be a much bigger problem if the conductor's missing, right?"

Well, she's not wrong, but.....

Though it's not like we'll be found out that easily, but I guess it'll be much better if we're more careful when we're passing the police stations? Mafuyu is someone who had shot advertisements before, so there might be people who may recognize her in single glance.

"Where are we going?"

"The district office."

"District office?"

We alighted at the station located in the middle of the city, then made our way towards the office streets by walking through the north entrance of the station. In response to my suggestion that lacked any serious consideration, the runaway-girl Mafuyu seemed pretty scared.

"What if they realized that we're running away from home....."





"It'll be fine if we walk in with our heads held high! They probably wouldn't even consider the possibility of two people running away from home entering the district office just like that, right?"

Then again, it's a little too abnormal for me to be carrying a guitar case and luggage, so I made Mafuyu take these two things and hide in the bathroom, while I walked into the environmental office by myself.

"Large rubbish? Ah, we do, there's a chart over there."

The fat lady at the counter took her ballpoint pen and tapped at the waste classification chart before I finished my sentence.

"Urm..... What I want to ask is, I don't really want to throw it away, but rather, where will I find the things that I accidentally threw away?"

The lady tilted her head and looked at me.

"Meaning..... I've thrown something away by mistake....."

"What? You mean you want to find something? Impossible, absolutely impossible." For a brief moment, I had a really strong impulse to just slap her on her head. After hounding the lady for quite a while, I finally got something about some environmental center. It's a treatment plant where they crush the large-sized rubbish into smaller pieces.

"But even if you go there..... it's impossible, you definitely won't find it. Do you know just how much rubbish is sent there daily? Do you really think you'll find it after getting there?"





"Thanks, lady."

I quickly ran out of the place. She actually asked me if I thought I would find it after getting there? I think I can, so how about that!?

The environmental center is located at the fringes on the other end of the city. I alighted at a station which I had never been to before, and it still took us another twenty minutes before we arrived at our destination, which is located on a small hill. When we finally saw the sheer size of the building amid the green forestry, both Mafuyu and I stopped in our tracks subconsciously.

Trucks filled with large trash rumbled past our sides. The two of us could only stand by the side of the road and watched on in amazement, as we narrowly avoided being crushed by those trucks.

"It's so huge....."

Mafuyu mumbled, as if to voice out my feelings within.

Our school can be considered rather spacious, but this place is of another level altogether. The structure which we could see is already many times larger than our school, and it was constantly giving off loud sounds.

The words of the lady at the environmental office rang next to my ears again:
"Impossible, absolutely impossible!"

"In any case..... let's take a look first?"

"Urm..... mmm."





We were almost runned over by an outgoing truck just as we reached the entrance. Mafuyu was coughing hard due to the dusts blown up by the truck. 'Environmental Center - Waste Crushing Plant' — that was what is written on the doorpost.

"Where should we go?"

Just as I was looking around us, Mafuyu quietly pointed towards the left. There was a sign that says 'Registration Lobby' and an arrow pointing to the left. At some distance to the direction of the arrow, one could see a small building similar to that of a petrol station.

As we got closer, we could see a large roof extending off that building. Beneath it was a metallic plate about the size of a car, and next to it was a machine that looked like a mailbox. A large 'STOP' was painted on the asphalt in white.

"This should be used to measure the weight of the trucks?" Mafuyu said. I see, so they'll have to weigh themselves upon entering or exiting the place? If so, there should be people at the registration lobby, right?

"Do you think you can find your bass in such a huge junkyard? Perhaps it's already been crushed already, you know?"

"I won't know..... if we don't check it out."

That sounded like I was trying to console myself.

Just as we walked to the 'STOP' right before the weighing area, the door of the registration lobby suddenly opened. We flinched in shock and stopped in our tracks.

"No no, I said no! Are you guys coming here to throw your junk? You can't!"





The mister walked towards us aggressively, causing the frightened Mafuyu to hide behind my back.

"We won't accept small-sized rubbish here..... Eh? Hmm?" The mister suddenly walked right up to me, "Isn't this a guitar? You can't throw that guitar away!"

"Eh? You don't do guitars here?"

"We can, but I won't allow it."

..... What?

"Guitar is the soul of men! It will be sad if the King of Blues, B.B. King, is to abandon his signature Lucille guitar, yeah? It will be even worse if Brian May from Queen is to abandon his Red Special!"

What the heck is this person talking about?

"But Jimi Hendrix had burned quite a few guitars before, right?"

"That's not throwing away, is it? He's burning those as offerings to the god of rock! I can forgive that because he's Jimi Hendrix. Eh? You look pretty young, but you've actually heard of Jimi Hendrix before?"

"Eh? Yeah..... I quite like him."

The eyes of the mister sparkled. Seemed like he's a die-hard fan of old-school rock.

"Oh, I see! I like his music best when he's at The Jimi Hendrix Experience, though after the Woodstock Music Festival, he....."





The mister suddenly began to chat excitedly..... go back to your work already! I turned my head back slightly, and realized that Mafuyu had already run off to the faraway building to escape from all this. Damn traitor, that caused me to listen to the mister talking about the Woodstock Music Festival by myself for a full twenty minutes.

"..... So do reconsider about throwing away your guitar. You should chase your dreams while you're still young!"

I could finally have the chance to interrupt, and thus I shook my hands hastily in denial.

"You're misunderstanding things. I'm not here to throw things away, but to get them back."

"Eh?" I began explaining to the confused mister about how I accidentally threw away my bass. The mister suddenly said this unexpectedly with tears in his eyes,

"..... So..... So that's how it is..... After all, it was the first time you purchased an instrument by yourself..... a youthful memory that you'll not be forgetting anytime soon....."

Urm, I never said anything about me going to buy the instrument for the first time, yeah? Though you're not wrong to say that.....

"You finally bought it after saving up your new year's money for so long. Even before you could play the bass well, you had already thought of the name for your future band, as well as the name for your very first album. However, your mother hates rock music, and she actually threw your bass away without your approval..... Regardless of the times, the rockers will always be facing the fate of being





persecuted....." Stop cooking up your own story! "And so you've went to the district office, and was directed here. I'm touched by how great you are. Remember to give it a lady's name after you've got your bass back!"

"Eh? Can I find it? You know it's been sent over here?"

"I don't. There are tons of rubbish sent here daily, so how would I possibly know that!"

Don't be that cold all of a sudden!

"I don't think you can get it back, yeah? I'll tell you first, but I cannot allow you to search in the compressing facilities, and don't even think about looking in the pit where everything has already been processed. I can allow you to take a search on the heap before our processes, but you'll be hindering our work."

"I see....."

Felt like the chances are slim. Perhaps I was really too naive?

"Speaking of which, when was your bass collected? Today? Don't tell me it's last week!"

"Urm..... hmm..... It's the day before yesterday."

The mister suddenly opened his eyes wide, "Day before yesterday?"

I nearly thought he was about to transform. I retreated a step back in shock.

"Is it already too late..... if it was the day before yesterday?"





"Is it really the day before yesterday? That's impossible."

"..... Eh?"

"We only collect rubbish on Wednesdays. You didn't take it here by yourself either, did you?"

I nodded my head in confusion.

I did indeed take it to the rubbish collection center on Monday night, and I didn't see it by Tuesday.

"Perhaps someone picked it up and took it away?"

"Eh.....?"

If that's really the case, then it's hopeless. I definitely can't find it.

"The television and stuff there were gone as well, so perhaps....."

"Eh? Then it must be by the other operators!"

The mister crossed his arms and nodded his head as though he had figured out everything. Operators?

"You sometimes see some small trucks going around the city and broadcasting 'We're collecting large-sized rubbish for free', yeah? That. We call them weevils. See, all that rubbish has been pasted with stickers given out by the district office before they are thrown away, yeah? If so, it'll be a crime to take that trash away!"

"Then..... do you know where the operators are?"





"Hmm.....?"

The mister lowered his head and pondered for a while. I guess he wouldn't know that.

We've come to this place already, and yet it was for nothing. So the chances of finding my bass is really zero?

I nodded my head dejectedly in thanks towards the mister, and said, "Sorry for interrupting your work." I then started to make my way towards Mafuyu. Just then, a voice suddenly came from behind me.

"Oi! Hold on, rocker. Where's your house?"

Huh?

"If it is within the working areas of the operators that I knew, I can tell you about it!"

The instance I turned my head, the mister looked just like those muscular chaps similar to Freddie Mercury. He propped up his thumb and said,

"You want to get back your beloved instrument, right? Then obviously I can't leave you by yourself!"

As Mafuyu looked into the skies through the train's window, she murmured, "Looks like it's about to rain."

I nodded. I was sitting next to Mafuyu, with the guitar clamped in between my legs. I took out the list of information of the operators written by that mister, and double





checked it yet again. Despite him giving me the details of six operators, there was not one of which he knew the address. I guess even someone from the recycling plant would not have known that much. The few operators had names like whatever-transport or something-something-agency or center. What's even more exaggerating was that there's only the name of the person-in-charge as well as their cellphone number available - they couldn't be a bunch of guys dealing with illegal things, could they?

"Those chaps ain't a good bunch of people, so you better be careful."

He did say that before as well. Taking away the large-sized rubbish by themselves isn't exactly a serious crime, but you can't consider it a legit and honest career either.

"Are you really going to continue looking for it?"

"Mmm. In any case, we'll visit the district office another time after lunch, to see if we can get the address of the operators from the phone book or their registration information."

"We definitely won't be able to find it....."

"If you're feeling tired, you don't have to follow me around. Do you want to wait for me somewhere and take a rest?"

"I'm not following you!" Mafuyu suddenly became angry, "You're the one who said you were coming along with me so as to help me with my luggage. You didn't forget that, did you?"

"Urm, it's as you've said, and so.....?"

"And so I'm coming along as well."





Then stop complaining!

I looked out of the window as well. The same scenery of the streets flowed past our eyes, but somehow it felt different from what we had seen yesterday. Perhaps it was because it was lunch hour now? Will Chiaki be hungry without my bento? The things at school appeared briefly in my mind, but they seemed like things that were from a long, long time ago.

If I am to return to that everyday life, then I am bringing Mafuyu along as well. Therefore, I must definitely find my bass, and retrieve everything which I had abandoned - and find that sound that binds us together.





Chapter 17

Bagel Sandwich, Spring, Engineering Firm



You're just being obstinate!





After searching through the district office, the library, as well as the works progress administration at the cultural center, we had only managed to find three operators with addresses that looked more like that of a company's. That's not a surprise though, because it seems like a majority of the people in the recycling industry works alone.

"How should we go about asking them after our call connects? It's illegal for them to do so, isn't it?"

Mafuyu sat on the chair in the works progress administration, and asked me weakly.

"Hmm..... you're kinda right....."

If they had really removed the large-sized rubbish by themselves, then they'll probably not tell me about it truthfully anyway; and even if they had really taken it, it's not like I can just barge in to ask for it. In the end, all I could do was to walk out of the corridor with a brochure and the photocopied details with me. I then switched on my cell phone. Whoa! Most of the missed calls were from Chiaki's number, and she had even sent me a message as well; Tetsurou also made a call. I could only pretend not to see those things for now.

So how should I go about confirming it?

An idea suddenly popped up in my mind: all I have to do is to ask if they had collected a bass, then wouldn't that narrow the places where I'll have to search? I made up my mind and dialed the very first number.

"..... Mmm, hello..... There's something which I'd like to ask..... Right, mmm..... Electric bass."

It was really quite troublesome for me to ask the same set of questions for six times.





Moreover, aside from that whatever-agency, the rest of the numbers are all cell phone numbers. I kept hearing those noisy sounds of exhausts; the sounds of the cargo or something rumbling about; music that was overly loud to the point where the sounds were distorted; and the broadcast of "This recycling vehicle will collect all electronic trash for free". Everyone who picked up the phones were probably the truck drivers themselves.

After hanging up my phone, I walked back into the reference room wearily.

"So did you get something?"

"Mmm..... All six said they did not collect the bass."

"So..... that means that there may be other operators which that mister does not know of?"

If so, then there's really not a single piece of clue left. It may be someone pretending to be the official operator and drove everything away first, before they decide on what to do with the trash. Regardless, we were at a dead end.

The office lady at the cultural center were beginning to be suspicious of us, and so we decided to leave the place quickly. The skies were gloomy, and filled with thick layers of dark clouds.

I sat on the pedestrian fence, and shared a bagel sandwich which we had bought at a convenience store together with Mafuyu as our lunch.

"If only we've some sort of clue....."

I murmured as I took a gulp of canned coffee to wash down the food particles in my mouth.





"Hey, why are you trying so hard to find it?" Mafuyu asked as she lifted her head to look at me. "Are you that concerned about what I had said? Just forget it! We are currently fleeing from home! Just throw away everything and run away! It's not like we can find it anyway."

I kept staring at Mafuyu's guitar case. Though I could not quite explain it to her.....

"I'll definitely find it."

"You're just being obstinate!"

And so are you too!

"Then how about we have a bet!"

Mafuyu's eyes opened wide when I said that.

"..... What are we betting?"

What are we betting huh? Hmm..... I fell into silence for a brief moment. I had actually said that in the heat of the moment.....

"Well then....." I shifted my gaze to the asphalt, and pondered for a while. "If I find it, then you are to join the Folk Music Research Club. The winner was not decided back then, so you can think of this as a play-off."

With the sandwich and the oolong tea in her hand, Mafuyu lowered her head and said nothing for a while.

I could somehow feel that the person next to me nodding her head ever so slightly.





"In return....." Mafuyu suddenly raised her head. "If you cannot find it, then you'll have to listen to everything I say."

"Everything..... you say?"

"You'll have to help me with my luggage for life, and..... you'll be in charge of collecting money with a hat."

Isn't that how we are right now? No wait.....

"What's with me collecting money with a hat?"

"Because we'll have to come up with ways to earn cash! So....."

I really don't know how serious she is about all these things.

"So we'll have to play the guitar by the roadsides to earn some cash, then we'll go to one unfamiliar city after another via the train....."

Mafuyu's voice became softer and softer, as if she was dreaming. Even though it was quite pathetic for me to do so, I still let out a laugh. I began to feel like that sort of life may not be too bad after all.

"But won't I need an instrument too?" I interrupted half in jest.

"But you are really bad at playing. It's better for you not to play if we want to earn some cash from it."

I threw the coffee can into the rubbish bin with my might. I suck at playing, so sorry for that!





"But you can consider singing? I've never heard you sing before."

"I humbly decline."

Singing huh.....

"..... Ah!"

Mafuyu turned her head around in shock as she heard the strange voice that came out from my mouth. She nearly dropped the sandwich which she had just taken a bite at onto the floor, as she was holding it with her right hand.

"What? Is there something?"

"A song! I've found a clue."

"Eh?"

Mafuyu tilted her head as she could not figure out what I was saying. I took out my cell phone, but I hesitated for a while when I saw the image on its LCD display. Am I really gonna do this? I am currently running away from home, yeah?

The problem is, if I give up that tiny clue I have, then I can't come up of anything else. Moreover, I don't have much time left on my hands now. My bass is probably on the verge of being crushed.

I dialed the number of my house.

"..... Tetsurou? Mmm, it's me."





"Oh, it's you! Breakfast was really delicious! So bagel sandwich will still taste nice even after it's chilled!"

"Yeah, mmm....." For a moment, I thought of something: could this fella not realized that I was not at home for most of the day, and that I did not attend school for today?

"Oh, what are you doing now? Something happened? The school and Chiaki had called me as they tried looking for you, yeah? I didn't see you yesterday when I returned home as well. I thought you had ran over to Misako's due to you missing the embrace of your mother, so I made a call to her. However, she said that it is impossible for you to be looking for her, and had even asked me not to call her anymore - even though she's actually still reluctant of letting me go....."

Tetsurou was the same as ever. No, he had gotten even worse.

"Well....." I took a gulp before continuing on, "I ran away from home."

I could somehow feel Mafuyu's eyes widening as I said that.

"..... So even Nao is running away from me..... No, I've sort of realized that yesterday, but I did not want to believe it....." Tetsurou's voice sounded a little choked. "Look, I'm sorry. I'll never puke at the doorsteps due to my stupor, and I'll clean up my room properly. I will never sing aria naked after a bath. Let's start all over again, alright?"

"Quit saying such disgusting things!" If you want to say those things, say them to Misako! "It's not that. It has nothing to do with Tetsurou. In any case, I don't have much time left to be chatting with you!"

"Eh? Wait, hold on, don't tell me your dying words, Nao! I don't wanna listen, I don't wanna!"





"Shut up! I'll apologize to you as many times as you wish after that, so answer me my question for now. Tetsurou, you should be at home throughout the day before yesterday, right? Did some trucks that collect large-sized trash for free past by our house that day?"

What followed was a long silence. I turned around to look at Mafuyu, who was staring at my cell phone uneasily, and made a gesture to signal that it is okay.

"..... Large-sized trash?"

"Those trucks that circle round and round while blaring those irritating music."

"Ah— yeah, yes yes yes."

Tetsurou sounded like a patient who had slowly woke up from his dreams.

"Hmm, it probably came during the day? I remember turning up the volume of the sound systems by a notch as it was really noisy."

My hand which was gripping onto the cell phone was trembling nonstop.

"So it did come? Then....."

My palms were wet from my sweat, so I changed the phone onto another hand.

"Then was the truck playing any sort of music?"

This time, there was no hesitation in his answer, and he sounded rather certain as well.





"Oh, yes. Vivaldi."

I sprang up from the pedestrian fence.

"Thanks, Tetsurou. This may be the last goodbye, so remember not to drink too much, and eat more vegetables. Take care!"

I immediately hung up the phone after saying that out hastily, and switched off my phone.

I then took up the luggage on the ground, and carried the guitar case on my back once again.

"What's going on?"

"I've a clue now!"

I picked out one of the many leaflets given to me by the mister from the treatment plant. During one of the calls, I heard something from the background noises - Vivaldi's <The Four Season> — [the first movement of <Spring>](#). Mutou's Engineering Firm! I was really lucky, as that was the only operator out of the six that I had managed to get the address of.

I had actually managed to connect to the thread of the faintest possibility. I began making my way towards the train station, and all I heard was Mafuyu scurrying behind me in her haste to catch up to me.

Mutou's Engineering Firm is located at about two cities away. After taking the train for four stations, we still have to transfer to another train and then travel for another





three stations before we arrived. It was already four something in the afternoon when we reached the place. Why did they travel that far to my house to collect the junk? If not for the guy at the treatment plant, it would be impossible for me to locate this place.

The city where my house at is not highly populated, nor is it bustling with life; but if I am to be slightly exaggerating, this is a totally desolated place. Even though it was separated by a river, the plot of empty space filled with weeds in front of the station stood out exceptionally. The noise from the Pachinko parlors further brought out the sad loneliness of the place.

Mafuyu did not speak since a while back.

"Are your legs fine?"

She would definitely shake her head fervently if I asked her that - however, just about everyone can see that her steps were not stable at all. I was a little worried, and so I tried to slow down my pace as much as possible, so as to go along with her. The only problem was that the situation did not allow us to walk at a leisure pace.

We stopped at a book and stationery shop in front of the station, and checked the maps to confirm the location of Mutou's Engineering Firm. It's quite a distance away from the station.

It was partially due to Mafuyu not being able to walk too quickly, that resulted in us arriving at the place only after thirty minutes. It was a narrow road where two trucks could barely drive through side-by-side, and on the two sides of the road were old houses lined up together in a row - Mutou's Engineering Firm is located within one of those buildings. It was a two story building that seemed to be cut straight out from a black-and-white photo, and I didn't even have to see the rusted signboard to know that it's an engineering firm. It seemed like the whole of the first story was used as a





parking area as well as a working area - a purple colored truck was parked at the side, and the air was filled with the smell of burnt metal. Deeper in was a heap of things that looked like they were either tools or junk, but I could not quite see it clearly as it was getting dark already.

"It's this place?"

"Mmm."

The lights were switched on for the tin hut located on the second floor, which seemed to be the office. However, there were no one at the working area. I hesitated at the gate for a while. What to do? Should I head up to the second floor directly and say out everything truthfully? The other party may play dumb in response. Is everything that was picked up really stored inside?

"Wait here for a while, Mafuyu. I'll go take a look."

I placed the luggage next to Mafuyu's feet, and walked into the parking area. The smell of metal became heavier. At the side of the truck was a drill and lathe, as well as household appliances like an old television, fridge, microwave and etc.

I began searching for traces of my bass at the rubbish heap in the dark — couldn't find it.

"— Oi!"

A voice suddenly came from behind me, causing me to turn my head in shock. I saw a burly man who had the sleeves of his T-shirt rolled up to his shoulders. His expressions didn't look too friendly.

"What do you want? It's dangerous around here, so don't enter as you please."





"Urm, well....." The guitar case was about to slip off my shoulders, so I propped it back into place. "May I ask..... if you collect any electronics..... and stuff?"

"Yeah I do..... but what do you want me to collect? Not everything's free."

"Ah, no, I am not asking you to help me to collect something..... I just want to ask if you had collected some large-sized rubbish from my house on the day before yesterday? The address is No. 6, Second District, Town K. It's placed together with the television..... it's a bass....."

In the end, I asked the guy directly about it. Even though I should not have seen the guy's face clearly as he was standing in front of the faintly shining street light with the rays shining into my eyes, I could still detect a change in his expressions.

"Haa?"

I retreated a step back subconsciously.

"Urm..... you see..... I've accidentally threw it away in mistake as a large-sized rubbish....."

"Who the hell knows! We won't collect things that are not required from us, and moreover what reason do we have for running to a place that is two cities away? Think about that!"

That quick denial just further confirmed my doubts. It's because I did not say which city I am living in when I was giving him my address. This guy probably knew about the surrounding areas near my house at his fingertips, so he knew immediately where I was talking about after hearing K Town, but there's an even greater possibility.....





It's probably this person who has taken away the rubbish without any prior permission.

"..... But, my family members said they've seen this truck before?" I wove a lie. The man showed an expression as though the gum he was chewing on had changed into a caterpillar, and stared at me fiercely for quite a while. He then spat a mouthful of spit next to my feet.

"And then? What do you want?"

"..... I just want it back."

"I don't know!" The man began to play dumb - seemed like he was planning to feign ignorance all the way. "Bass? We do collect the typical guitars, and sometimes we accidentally picked up a bass or two as well, but we'll toss it away immediately."

"..... Where did you throw it to?"

"I don't know, I am not the person-in-charge here. Now just scram!"

"Please, may I know where do you throw them to? Please tell me!"

"Didn't I already say, I don't know! Stop creating trouble for me!"

The man spat yet again, and this time the spit nearly landed on my shoes. He stomped his foot on the sandy ground, and then tramped his way up the stairs to the office. A loud sound of the slamming doors then came to me, as if he was trying to break the door. I was frozen in my place for a while.

I was left alone in the space which was dark and filled with the smell of metal. A heavy feeling of tiredness suddenly landed on my shoulders, and it felt like my





muscles had kinked up together.

I had already came here— I had actually chased all the way here—

But my clues were dead once more.

I no longer had the strength to even walk.

Sha— I could suddenly hear a footstep. I lifted my head, and saw Mafuyu dragging the luggage over. I forced a smile at her. I had said many time that "I'll definitely find it", but the result was actually something like this - it just felt really embarrassing.

There's nothing which I could do. I did not manage catch up to my destination. It somehow felt like that I had been repeatedly doing that all these while.

Suddenly, Mafuyu stretched out her not very agile index finger, and pointed it at the parking area.

"..... Hmm?"

I raised my head and looked in the direction which she was pointing to.

Half of the purple truck was hidden in the shadows.

"Somehow— it feels like I've seen this vehicle somewhere before."

Mafuyu mumbled.

I stared at her for a while, before turning my attention back at the truck.





Just then, a flicker of light flashed past my mind.

I have an impression of it too.

I too, have seen that truck before.

I know this vehicle, so I must have seen it somewhere before. It must have passed by me at somewhere. Where is it? Just as I was trying to remember, what appeared in my mind however was the side profile of Mafuyu's face. Why? Why did that strangely colored truck remind me of Mafuyu? When exactly did I see it? When, where—

"Ah.....!"

I remembered.

I do know this truck, because I had seen it with Mafuyu before.

On that day when I first saw Mafuyu, we had brushed by this truck before.

At a faraway town next to the seas, in the silent forest within the mountains.

"..... Do you really think this is the truck which we saw back then?"

Mafuyu did not answer me, but I was not waiting for her answer either. We had no other options in our hands, since that was the only clue left.

Mafuyu and I looked at each other, and nodded at the same time.

If so— then let's get moving.





We walked out of the engineering firm, and traced our steps back to the train station.
Towards <The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>.





Chapter 18

The Department Store at the Ends of the World



I said I'm fine!





The slow and wobbly train which we took to the beach was the last train of the day, which means that we won't be able to return home tonight. As we walked along the wrinkled roads which were similar to the skins of old people, a gush of wind breezed through us, and it carried along with it the smell of the sea and the rain. The skies had already turned dark unknowingly, and it was still filled with dark, gloomy clouds. It looks as if a gentle prod of the fingers would cause the layers of clouds to break, and flood the lands with rain.

After passing by the residential district, we came to a small trail that leads uphill, and Mafuyu was already breathless from all the walking. She had to stop for a while after every distance of about tens meters, and take a short rest with her back bent slightly and her palms on her knees.

"That's why I said, there's no need for you to force yourself to come along with me."

"Idiot."

I had no idea if it was because of her panting for breath, but Mafuyu's reply was extremely short. Speaking of which, you should have worn some clothes that are easier to move around if you were running away from home, yeah? The last time I saw you, you were wearing the same fluffy dress as well.

What should I do? I can't possibly leave her here by herself, right? "Do you want me to piggyback you?" If I dump the guitar and the luggage, I should be barely able to do so, right? Though it will be really tough for me to walk uphill.

"I will never do something as embarrassing as that. I'm fine."

Mafuyu's shoulders were heaving up and down, but she still answered me forcibly.

"You won't collapse like you did last time, right?"





"I said I'm fine!"

Good.

However, I still helped to support Mafuyu when we reached the fringes of the forest.

The guitar was hanging on my right shoulder, the luggage on my left, and Mafuyu's right arm was slung over my neck. I could not even straighten my back with all the weight pressing down on me, and yet I felt like I was on a high, and that feeling surpassed all fatigue which I was supposed to be experiencing. What the hell is wrong with me?

"Isn't it heavy for you?"

The stubborn Mafuyu was leaning half of her body weight against me, and she was walking mostly on a single leg. She asked me that worriedly, but I never gave her a reply, and instead I sung <[Hey Jude](#)> from The Beatles. *And any time you feel the pain, hey, Jude, refrain; Don't carry the world upon your shoulders* — that's the songs of the lyrics.

I could hear the laughter of Mafuyu next to my ears.

"You are better off singing. It's much better than your bass."

Shut up! You don't have to care.

There's nothing too bad about the weight of the luggage - the biggest problem we faced was the poor vision at night. There was no proper road in the forest, and even though the trucks had sort of rolled one out, it was still filled with the trees roots, making it easy for us to trip on them. We had bought a torchlight from the





convenience store before boarding the train, and that was the only source of light for us.

We had nearly tripped a few times, but the other person would support the falling person with all their might. If the two of us were to really fall down, then we would probably never get on our feet anytime soon.

The sounds of the waves of the nearby sea had infiltrated the dark forest, which sounded like the quiet sobs of a few thousand people. The night was especially dark due to the cloudy skies, and that caused us not to be able to see the roots on the grounds properly. Even if the end of the forest which leads to the mouth of the oceans is just a few meters away from us, we would probably not have realized it and walked on anyway, only to fall to our demise. We were fondling through the darkness for nearly the whole of the route, and we could faintly hear the rumbling sounds of thunder from faraway.

Even so, when we reached our destination, the two of us stopped our footsteps and lifted our gaze off the ground at the same time.

Even amid the dark night, we could feel that the forests had come to an end.

'This place is indeed something special,' I thought to myself. The outlines of the layers of junk seemed to be giving off a faint glow of light.

<The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>.

The place that has gathered many torn and tattered wishes.

The place was surrounded by silence, as though it had been shifted to an alternate dimension. However, the place would be shaken by the occasional lightning which would light up the whole place in a flash, followed by the sounds of thunder.





When we saw the entrance of the junkyard, both of us leaned against each other and just stood there for a long time.

It's too big. I have to dig out a tiny instrument from this mountain, which is made up of tons of rubbish heaped up together — it suddenly felt like I wouldn't be able to find it even if I spend my whole summer looking.

"..... Are you really going to find it?"

Mafuyu asked softly. I nodded my head silently, and put away Mafuyu's arm from my neck, before making my way to the junk mountain alone. Since I am planning to find it, and since I am already here, there is no point for me to be dejected forever. It will not do if I don't start searching.

If it was thrown here on the day before yesterday, then the location of the bass should be somewhere close to the entrance. I flashed the torchlight at the foot of the mountain, and began scanning the gaps in between the junks which consists of derelict bicycles, vending machines, Pachinko machines, grandfather clocks and etc.

I turned my head around inadvertently, and saw Mafuyu sitting on the luggage and gazing at the junk mountain with a tired expression.

I'll just let her take a rest. As it is something which I had lost, I have to be the one to find it.

How long did I take to walk around the foot of the mountain once? I really don't know. When I returned back to Mafuyu's side, I was so tired my eyes could barely open. The light from the torchlight was much weaker than before, and my hands





were filled with filth.

"But it's impossible to find it....."

I heard Mafuyu's voice, and so I switched off the torchlight and sat down next to her.

"I've only..... walked around it..... once."

My throat was parched, so I could barely make a sound.

"And it looks like it is about to rain! Even if it really is here, you won't be able to repair it if it is drenched by the rain."

"That's why I have to find it as quickly as possible!"

"Why? I don't get it. Why are you so persistent about it? I-Is it because I said that I like the tone it produces? But..... those words....."

"Because that is a really special bass."

I replied with a hoarse voice,

"Even though it is neither expensive nor rare, I had changed its pickups, modified its wiring, shaved it with a file, and even installed a tuning circuit - all so that the bass can match the tone of your guitar. The tone of that bass was created by me, so it's a unique bass."

I could almost hear Mafuyu holding her breath.

And there's the promise between Senpai and I in that bass as well.





I would not have thrown it away if that bass was not that important to me.

"Moreover..... we haven't looked at the insides."

A drop of rain fell on my face as I stood up.

It's raining. I have to hasten my pace.

I stepped on the roof of the derelict car, and began scaling up the slopes with a *krakaka* sound from my feet. It took me that much time to look through the foot of the mountain, so how long do I need to comb through the whole mountain? Moreover, it's not like I can definitely find it. I did not have any definite proof that it was thrown here.

Even so—

It won't do for me to just let myself be drenched by the rain either.

Giii— a sound of the rubbing of metal came from behind me. I turned my head around - on the trail that I had walked on, was a white silhouette which seemed like it almost blown away by the winds.

Mafuyu had followed me.

"What are you doing!?"

As I had reached the crater of the mountain first, I stretched out my hand, and grabbed Mafuyu by her wrist, before pulling her up to my side. Mafuyu had nearly fallen down the mountain due to her unstable footsteps and her weak right hand. She finally got on the slanted industrial-use refrigerator after much difficulty, and said while panting,





"I'm going to help you find it."

"You don't have to, and we only have a single torchlight anyway....."

"I want to help!"

I heaved a sigh, and directed my attention back into the center of the junk mountain. As I looked at the giant swamp of darkness before me, I could not help but be overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness. I actually have to look for my bass amid this nightmare of the huge piece of land before me that I can never wake up from.

I shone the weak, untrustworthy rays from the torchlight towards the valley, and I suddenly saw something reflective. I stared at that thing carefully with the light from the torchlight still shining at it - it's not the sharp reflection of metal, but rather, it's from a much softer reflective surface. Mafuyu realized what it was before I do.

"..... It's still there!"

Her voice was as disoriented as her breaths.

Mafuyu then made her way down the basin. She first stepped on the edge of a protruding cupboard, before grabbing onto a half-buried metal desk with her left hand, and moved downwards slowly and carefully. I followed her hastily, while remembering to shine out the path for Mafuyu with the torchlight.

The grand piano located at the basin was more slanted than when I first saw it. The cover was already torn off from it and slid off to the side. How many storms had it went through already? I shone my torchlight at its interiors, and the still orderly strings were filled with filth and decaying leaves.





I opened up the key lid, and pressed gently on the keys.

A surprisingly clear sound stirred up waves of ripples in the swamp of darkness. But that's all there is to it, and the echoes disappeared in an instant. So the resonance back then was really just my auditory hallucination - or not?

"Why can it still make a sound, despite it in such a dilapidated state....."

Mafuyu said with a voice close to crying next to me.

Probably because we are at <The Department Store of Hearts' Desires>? Because this is a special place that fulfills the true wishes of people who come from faraway places.

Mafuyu stood before the keyboard, and began playing every single key, starting from the lowest A note - it started off as a series of slow and sturdy steps, and then it gradually changed into a series of light springy hops, before finally streaking past like a flash of lightning - the five fingers of her left hand climbed up all the way to the highest C note.

She did not miss a single note, and every single note was that clear and penetrating.

The lingering sounds of the piano shrouded us like the mist beneath the moonlight.

"Why..... We easily found something that I no longer want, but why can't we find the thing that you're looking for?"

Mafuyu mumbled with her head slumped low as she held on to the edges of the piano. Is that a raindrop that has fallen on the keyboard, or is it something else? I really don't know. It just felt like the junk beneath my foot was noisily responding to the brief sounds of the piano that broke the silence for an instant.





That feeling — it's just like the tuning of the orchestra prior to the start of a performance. The oboes began playing the A notes, and the concertmaster of the violin followed with the same note. The rest of the orchestra then began to tune themselves to the pitch of that tone.

So— they will only respond to Mafuyu?

Just then—

I suddenly remembered something.

If this is really a special place—

And if it can really fulfill my heartfelt desire—

"Mafuyu....."

I gave off a tight voice. Mafuyu raised her head to look at me.

"Can you play the piano for me?"

"..... Eh?"

"Just play something, anything. Ah, no, try playing songs that require you to use the white keys more. Can you please..... do that for me?"

Mafuyu was dumbfounded. She stared at her right hand for a while, before lifting her head to look at me again.

"But I....."





"It's fine if you use just your left hand to play."

Because it has to be Mafuyu who's playing it.

"Why.....?"

"If Mafuyu's the one playing, then I think it will probably respond to your calls."

Mafuyu shifted her gaze from my face slowly, and they landed on the keyboard of the piano.

That was something that she had already abandoned.

I did not wait for Mafuyu's reply, and once again scaled up the slope made up of layers of rubbish. The opposite of the basin just so happens to be the highest point of the junk mountain — a peak made up by a heap of cars.

Right when I climbed up the highest point of the mountain—

The sounds of the piano came from beneath me.

The five separating chords disappeared into the darkness, and began spreading outwards bit by bit as they began to change form, just like a flock of birds riding on a gust of wind.

Book 1 of <The Well-Tempered Clavier> — [Prelude and Fugue No. 1 in C major.](#)

That is the very first article in the piano scriptures left by Bach.

It's a prelude that is like a fragile crystal, created by stacking up layers and layers of





tones together.

When she played the final chord, the crystal shattered instantly — the bright sparkling shards scattered all over the junk mountain. Every single piece of junk seemed to be awakened by Mafuyu, and they were all raring and ready to sing.

I sat on the engine cover of the derelict car, then closed my eyes and listened carefully.

Mafuyu's fingers weaved out parts of the main melody of the fugue. A second voice, followed by a third, soon joined in the lonely song of prayer in the dawn. Under the lead of the piano, the junk buried within the valley began to resonate — the rich sounds of the string's instruments; the flutes and trumpets; the crisp rings of the tambourines.

The forth fugue flowed next.

But how? Mafuyu's right fingers shouldn't be able to move. I turned my head around in disbelief, but all I could see was a bottomless pit of darkness. The sounds created by the piano were like the waves that clashed against each other, but I had no idea where they came from. Could she be playing the four voices by using some techniques that I didn't know just by using her left hand? Or did I just fill in the missing parts with my memories and my auditory hallucination?

I don't know. All I can do is continue finding my bass, before the magic of Mafuyu disappears.

I dove into the sounds which filled up the atmosphere, and held onto my breath as I went deeper and deeper. I pried open the arguing viola and cello, and continued diving deeper into sea of the low-pitched sounds. I plunged both of my hands into the ocean bed to search for the sound that is resonating to the sounds of Mafuyu's





piano - that obscure and tiny sound.

I found it.

That place was pulsating each and every time Mafuyu's fugue slid down the slopes of the low-pitched notes.

It's the place where the heart is located.

I opened my eyes wide. Despite surrounded by darkness, I could see that place clearly. I slid down the slope of the derelict cars, and crawled along the ridge of the junk mountain. Finally, I could feel the pulse on my palms, the pulse that was supporting the faraway footsteps of the fugue. It's located along the inner slopes of the mountainside.

Right in between the oil barrel with a hole on its side and a small car without its wheels, I found it.

I stretched my hands into the space between the two junk, and gripped onto the neck of the bass. I could feel the strings vibrating in resonance to each and every note played by Mafuyu. That was definitely not my auditory hallucination, because my bass was really trembling to the noise that is real.

I found it. I finally found it.

I pulled out my bass from within the junk. The grey body of the bass was filled with scratches, while the four strings were still vibrating slightly to the sounds of Mafuyu's piano. I could clearly see traces of damage that were sustained when Mafuyu slammed the bass against the ground that day.

I suddenly remembered the words of the mister at the rubbish treatment plant:





"Remember to give it a lady's name after you've got your bass back". But that is impossible — I had only realized that after regaining what I had lost. I looked at the bass in my hands breathlessly—

It's just like a small part of me which I had lost, so there is no need for me to come up with any other name for it.

"..... You really found it?"

Mafuyu stared at the Aria Pro II in my hands in disbelief. She was waiting for me next to the piano this whole time.

"I said I'd definitely find it."

My voice was still shaking when I replied to her, because I was still unable to believe it either.

Mafuyu took the bass away from my hand. She stared at the long scratch on the body for quite a while, before caressing it gently with her fingers.

"I'm sorry..... It must have hurt, right?"

"Urm, you don't have to apologize....."

"Ah! It's not like I'm apologizing to you!"

Mafuyu turned away from me while hugging onto the bass in her chest.

"..... Thank god."





The magic seemed to have dispelled the instant Mafuyu mumbled that. A loud crash of thunder came rumbling, and huge drops of rain began to fall onto the junk with *pita pita* sounds.

"It's raining. Let's go inside! Where's the luggage?"

"Eh? Inside.....?"

"Ah, we placed it at the forest there, right? I'll take them here, or else your guitar will get wet as well. Go inside and wait for me."

"Where's inside.....?"

I pulled open the door of a car that is located on the slope. I then grabbed Mafuyu by her arm and shoved her inside.

"I totally did not notice that there's such a big car buried in here."

Mafuyu said that as she sat in the co-driver's seat. "I found it on my second time here." My hair was still dripping wet when I answered her. As the interior of the car was surprisingly clean, to the point where no one would realize it is that of a derelict car, I would occasionally come in for a rest.

Mafuyu slowly stretched her body to the back of the car. She was grabbing onto a towel when she came back to her seat.

Just as I was taking the luggage from the entrance of the junk valley and running back to the car, the sky suddenly began to rain heavily as though it had its bottom





removed. In order to prevent Mafuyu's guitar from getting wet, I sheltered it beneath my body, but that resulted in me being drenched instead. I took the towel from Mafuyu gratefully, and dried my hair with it. A surge of overwhelming sleepiness assaulted me when I leaned my back against the seat, but I forced myself to sit up straight as I grabbed onto the steering wheel.

"..... Just sleep if you're feeling sleepy."

Mafuyu murmured beside me.

"Eh? Ah..... I'm not..... mmm."

"I'm this tired even though I didn't do much, so you should be worse off than me, right?"

"..... I never thought that you could be that considerate towards others."

"I'm so worried about you! Idiot!"

The towel was snatched away from me. Mafuyu turned her body away forcibly, and curled her body against the co-driver seat.

The rain was getting heavier and heavier. Being in the car where more than half of its body was buried within the junk, the echoes of the rain sounded really intriguing - it's just like the static noise of the television.

What time is it now? I didn't even have the strength to take my cell phone so that I can check the time.

I was so tired it felt like the bones in my body would shatter at any moment.





However, before I succumb to sleep, there is something that I have to ask Mafuyu no matter what - it's about the piano that I had heard earlier, the fugue right after the prelude.

That sound..... Let's cast aside the prelude for a moment - it's impossible for the fugue to be played by a single hand. Could it be..... that Mafuyu's right hand could move at a time like that?

Mafuyu's shoulders were rising and falling rhythmically, and I could even hear the slight breaths coming from her. In the end, I swallowed my own question.

The only thing I am certain of, is that my bass is currently lying on the backseat of the car, together with Mafuyu's guitar. That is the only thing that is not imaginary, because I have definitely gotten it back.

If so, then nothing else matters anymore.

I shut my eyes, and allowed the sounds of the rain to continue their ruckus around me.

It was not before long that I sank into sleep.





Chapter 19

The Song of Blackbird



*If it is just something of this level,
anyone can play it if they practice hard enough.*





I was awoken by the blinding rays that were shining into my eyes.

Despite wanting to wake up, my whole body - from my neck to my spine, from my waist to my flank - every part was aching. I forcibly swallowed the moan that was about to slip out of my mouth.

I opened my eyes. The light of the morning sun was shining into the car from the window to my right. As I endured the pain all over my body, I cringed and looked at the co-driver seat - Mafuyu was still sleeping soundly as she faced me, and her long maroon hair had spread messily on the tilted seat. She looked much better compared to yesterday.

I twisted my body around in the cramped driver seat, stretched my shoulders, and turned my stiff neck. I could barely move only after I finished doing some brief stretching. I gently opened the door and headed outside.

The rain from last night had already stopped, and a thick layer of mist surrounded us. I thought that the sunlight was quite piercing when I first woke up, but in reality the sky was barely turning white - it was still rather dark. I took out my cell phone from my pocket to confirm the time. It's only five in the morning.

Still, I do not have any desire to go back to the car to sleep for a while more.

I slept last night without thinking too much into things, as I was too tired back then. But thinking back, Mafuyu was sleeping right next to me, and the car is an enclosed space as well - how can I possibly go back to sleep!

I then realized I have to check to see if my bass can still be salvaged. I gently opened the backdoor, while trying my best not to make any sound.

As I was reaching for my bass, I remembered that I did not bring along any of my





tools with me. I'm a real moron. I did not notice that for a while because I used to carry it by my side all the time. What to do? I won't be able to get the application form from within the bass - did it get wet?

Just as I was considering to look for a screwdriver in the rubbish heap nearby, I suddenly saw Mafuyu's guitar lying next to my bass. I had long thought that it is a pretty impressive guitar, and I always wanted to touch it. If possible, I hope I could play it once.

Since Mafuyu was still sleeping soundly in steady breaths, I succumbed to my desires pretty quickly. I tossed my bass aside and carried the guitar casing out of the car. I then tried to close the door as quietly as possible. The car was buried in such a way that it was slightly tilted towards the co-pilot seat, so it was rather difficult to do so without giving off any sound.

I climbed up the slope, and sat on the washing machine located higher up that was lying horizontally by its sides. The slightly damp morning air felt really comfortable.

I opened the guitar casing. What came into my eyes was a Fender Stratocaster with its beautiful grains, coated with a layer of transparent lacquer. This is an old guitar from the sixties, right? It probably cost somewhere around three million yen on the market? Filled with anticipation, I tried strumming the guitar with my trembling fingers, and the rich tone that came out did not sound like that of an electric guitar.

I sat myself properly on the washing machine, and began to play the melody using the three fingers technique, while I tapped out the tempo of the song with my fingertips at the same time. At a place where I could hear the real cries of the birds, I began to sing out the lyrics softly as I was shrouded by the mist. The air of the early morning absorbed all of my singing voices. When I reached the second verse, I decided to raise my volume so that my song could reach the birds that might be listening to me singing.....





"..... What song is that?"

The voice of a person suddenly rang, and that caused me to nearly slid off the washing machine in shock. Mafuyu was standing right beneath me, and she was looking in my direction while rubbing her droopy eyes.

"Urm, well....."

Mafuyu made her way through the junk and sat right next to me. There's not much space on the washing machine, so I could clearly feel the warmth of Mafuyu next to me.

"Sorry for playing it without your permission."

"It's fine. What's the name of that song?"

I felt embarrassed all of the sudden, so I stared at my hand that was holding onto the neck of the guitar.

"It's a song named <[Blackbird](#)>."

"It's a good song."

I was shocked, and lifted my head to stare at Mafuyu's face. Mafuyu was tilting her head and looking at me as though she was saying, 'What's wrong with you?'. I quickly shifted my eyes back onto the guitar.

"What sort of song is it?"

I had no intention of sprouting nonsense this time round.





"..... How much do you know about The Beatles?"

"Not too much," Mafuyu shook her head.

"I see..... alright." I thought about it for a while. How should I go about telling her this story? "The members of The Beatles were in extremely bad terms with each other when they were recording this song, and they were almost to the point of breaking up. And thus it seemed like the songs in the album were all pieced together only after the members were done recording their voices individually."

And yet, that album is still a classic. Just as Mafuyu had said, regardless of how the critics go about with their baseless accusations, the musicians can still come up with their finest works under the worse circumstances.

"It's said that Paul McCartney had recorded almost everything by himself; John Lennon was busy doing the sound collage for <[Revolution 9](#)>."

While John Lennon was working on the song of revolution which he was unable to convey to anyone, Paul McCartney had quietly finished the song that was dedicated to the blackbirds.

"..... So all this song needs is just a guitar to play."

"Mmm, even though it is simple to the point where you can play it, the accompaniment is still very nice to listen to."

I was pissed for a moment, and a wicked idea came to my mind. I had decided to try provoking her.

"But you can't do it. One can never play this if their right ring finger is immobile, as





this song requires the use of the three fingers technique. Serves you right! If you feel bitter about that, then go to America to get your hand treated before you scam back here!"

Mafuyu looked at me unhappily. She then snatched the guitar over, and began playing <Blackbird> - with only the thumb and index finger of her right hand.

She should have skipped some of the notes, right? But still, all I could hear is a playing that could not have been more perfect. Moreover, that should be the first time she heard the song, no?

After she was done with the first verse, Mafuyu pouted and placed the guitar back on my knees.

"..... Can you not do things that will make untalented people feel inferior?"

"If it is just something of this level, anyone can play it if they practice hard enough."

My ass!

Mafuyu got off the washing machine and went to the car. She opened the door to take my bass, before returning back to sitting down next to me..... She placed the bass on her knees, and quickly tuned the instrument up, before playing the G notes with a tempo that urges me to follow.

I immediately began playing from the beginning by coordinating to the sound of her bass. Slow down the tempo, and follow up with my singing till the end.....

The blackbird began to learn how to fly with its torn and tattered wings, as though it had been waiting for this exact moment for all its life to take flight.





"This sounds just like a normal bass if it is not connected to the amplifiers..... How intriguing....."

Mafuyu mumbled to herself when we were done with the whole song.

"But there will still be some differences to the tone if we plug this into the amplifiers, so I'll still have to adjust it. Moreover, the body of the bass was filled with scars and pits from the bumps it received."

Mafuyu looked at me rather uneasily,

"You should..... be able to restore it, right?"

I nodded my head, and began to play the prelude of <Blackbird> yet again. Even if the wings are torn and tattered, we just have to wait for the time for us to take flight.

"Is this..... a song that was written to give someone strength?"

Mafuyu suddenly asked that. I hesitated for a moment before answering her.

"It's said that the song was written for the liberation of black women, and I think Paul McCartney himself had said something like that before. However, I don't quite like to think of it as that."

"Why?"

"Because that is just too awkward! Why do we have to think so much about it? Just treating it as a song about a blackbird will do."

"So there's really such a type of bird?"





"Mmm. Its binomial name's *turdus merula*. It's a small bird that is full of black feathers, and only its beak is yellow. I heard that its cries are exceptionally clear and bright. I've seen it in photos before, but there's probably none of them in Japan."

[TLNote: Nao actually called it by the Japanese name as クロウタドリ. But it don't sound quite right to say blackbird again, so I've just placed its binomial name there.]

Just then, Mafuyu gave a slight smile. That was the first time I saw her real smile.

"..... But there is. I've seen it before."

I tilted my head.

"Where?"

Mafuyu narrowed her eyes, then prodded my chest with her index finger.

"Right here."

The mist was gradually dispersing, and the cries of the birds were getting clearer and clearer. The light of the morning was shining through the woods. It cast a really long shadow from Mafuyu and the dumbfounded me, which stretched all the way to the piano in the middle of the basin.







We spoke not a single word as we made our way back to the train station. My left shoulder was carrying the backpack, while my right hand was carrying my bass which was wrapped up in the towel, so Mafuyu had no choice but to carry her own guitar. Our footsteps were both really stable, unlike that of yesterday where we were stumbling about. The weather was incredibly clear as well, and it made me feel like I could just walk to the ends of the world.

However, both Mafuyu and I did not ask each other where we were planning to go to next, and instead we were walking side by side down the streets of the small town, which had already dried up due to the rays of the morning sun. Perhaps it was because the two of us had some sort of premonition about it?

"Are your legs fine?"

"Mmm, they're alright now."

"Really? It won't turn into the situation where half of your body is unable to move or something?"

"Probably not. The doctors said nothing, but I always felt like the right half of my body disappears when I sleep. Either that, or it will slowly sink into the waters with a gurgling sound. It felt really scary. Therefore, I always sleep with my left body facing downwards."

That should be Mafuyu's hallucination or something? Speaking of which.....

"But you were sleeping with the right side of your body downwards last night?"

Mafuyu looked at me in shock.

"It's true. You were sleeping while facing me."





"You're lying?"

"It's true!"

"You liar!"

Why do I have to lie about things like that!

"To be honest, I always felt like the right half of my body was buried in a hole, and soon I wouldn't be able to move my wrist either. If that's the case, I won't be able to play the guitar anymore."

I took a glance at Mafuyu's right hand which was hanging by her side.

"But your left hand can still move? If so....."

I took a look at my right hand.

"If so?" Mafuyu asked. I continued staring at my hand.

"Why don't you learn how to play the guitar with your teeth, like how Jimi Hendrix did?"

"Idiot!"

Mafuyu lifted her guitar case and swung it towards me.

"Why can't you say things like 'Then let me be your right hand instead', or something along those lines?"





"No wait! But..... it's my right hand, yeah? I can say that, but I suck at playing the guitar or the piano! I'll ruin your sublime techniques!" I explained as I ran away from her.

"It's your thought that counts! Geez!"

After chasing me for quite a while, Mafuyu suddenly walked away from me in quick steps. I chased up to her, and hesitated for a moment before saying,

"Oh right, Mafuyu....."

"What?" She asked snappily without even turning her head backwards.

"Do you still remember about our bet, about whether I'll find my bass or not?"

"..... Mmm."

"If so....." I pondered for a moment. How should I put my words? If I say something like, 'Your hand is no longer your personal problem, but the problem of the whole band too', Mafuyu would definitely get angry at that.

"I can still play the guitar for now, so it's fine."

"But after that....."

"I'll use my teeth to play. Fine?"

Whoa, she actually retorted like that. Seems like she is really pissed.

I maintained a three meters distance behind Mafuyu, and pondered on how I should put it into words.





"I understand, we'll just leave the things about the band as it is for now, but....."

I guess I'll just tell her truthfully.

"I wish to hear Mafuyu playing the piano once more."

Mafuyu did not stop her steps, and neither did she turn around to look at me. She did not answer me for a long time. However, she did slow down her steps, and she finally walked by my side. Somehow, it felt like she had nodded her head slightly.

In the end, I still missed the chance of saying what I wanted to say - to ask her to treat her hand by seeking the expertise of a specialist.

However, that is something that only Mafuyu can decide for herself. All I can do is to run away from home together with her, and perhaps lend her my shoulder once in a while.

The first person to find us was a young policeman that was cycling on along the road opposite of us. He hurriedly braked his bicycle at about ten meters away from us, and nearly slipped into the ditch by the side. The young policeman took out a notebook to repeatedly confirm our faces, before taking out a walkie-talkie to report to someone.

"What should we do? Run?"

Even though the policeman was grabbing me by my arm, I still whispered that into Mafuyu's ear, who was standing next to me. However, she shook her head quietly.





That was the end of our journey.

While waiting for the reply from his superior, the policemen was hounding Mafuyu for her signature like a dog, and he even asked her to sign the police notebook. Hey, is that really okay?

We were then brought to the train station. There were quite a few cars at the bus stop, and a huge group of adults had gathered - they were all faces that I hadn't seen before. It was until much later that I knew that they were the members of the orchestra that had come down specifically to look for Mafuyu, though there were some cops mixed in between as well. After they had confirmed our identities, the whole group of them rushed up to us with a "Whoa!", and that scared the heck out of us.

Miss Maki was among them as well. Oh shit, what is she doing here! Doesn't she need to go to school? Or does she have more time to spare because of her position as the music teacher? She walked up to me in huge strides with a sweet smile on her face, and the first thing she did was to award me with a slap.

"No, wait....."

Before I could explain, she slapped me on the other side of the face.

And then—

A car came speeding towards the bus stop at great speeds, and it even made a drift before stopping at a distance just as it was about to slam into a police car. And the person to open the door and step out of the car was—

"Papa?"

Mafuyu murmured that with a voice that could only be heard by me. The person who





was rushing over is indeed Ebisawa Chisato. His shirt was in a mess, and his eyes were dark and puffy, perhaps because he hadn't slept all night. His hair was messy, just like the mane of a defeated lion.

"So you really came here? What in the world were you doing for the past two nights? Think about how worried we all were—"

"..... What about your concert? Isn't it suppose to start today.....?"

Mafuyu mumbled as though she was dream talking. Ebichiri arched his eyebrows in response.

"What are you talking about? How can I carry on with the concert when you're missing? To think that you actually ran away from home!"

Ebichiri suddenly directed his attention at me, and pounced on me.

"Is it you? Are you the one who led Mafuyu away—!"

He grabbed me by my collar and shook me repeatedly, but all I could think of in a daze was: ah— what, so he is a typical father who gets worried about his own child too. I may have even smiled while thinking that. It suddenly felt like Ebichiri's roars were rather baffling.

"What were you thinking! How are you going to take responsibility if anything happened to Mafuyu—"

Suddenly, Mafuyu came in between her father and I, and pushed us apart. I fell to the floor on my butt by the sudden push, and all I could hear was a loud, sudden *pa*.

Mafuyu looked at the hand which she used to slap her father in disbelief - the right





hand with the immobile fingers. Ebichiri, with his face swollen from the slap, was stunned for a brief moment. A surge of anger reappeared in his eyes, and he slapped Mafuyu back. Just as Mafuyu was about to fall onto me from that slap, Ebichiri hurriedly grabbed her by her shoulders to prevent that from happening.

"In any case, apologize to everyone here!"

Ebichiri dragged Mafuyu into the center of the crowd, but all I did was stare at her back blankly. Is the bad habit of giving up immediately hereditary?

After Mafuyu and I were brutally lectured by the three policemen in charge, the rest of the searchers then began to leave gradually with their cars.

Mafuyu directed a glance at me as she was taken into the car by Ebichiri.

The expression in her eyes were no longer filled with dark clouds like before. Instead, it was a little happy, but a little lonely at the same time as well - I don't really know either.

Ebichiri then popped his head out of the window of the driver seat and said,

"You come in as well! I'll give you a lift."

The back door of the car opened, and I was really grateful for that. Even though the atmosphere in the car would probably be really awkward, the idea of not having to take a few hours of train ride back home is indeed something rather enticing.

"Sorry, Maestro Ebisawa, but this person will be taking the train back with me."

Miss Maki's cold voice came from above my head..... Damn, that's really scary. I don't have the guts to turn around to look at her.





Ebichiri nodded his head and pulled up the window. Hey, don't agree to it that easily! At least insist on it for a while?

However, the Ebisawa father and daughter pair drove away just like that, leaving me by myself in the wake of the exhaust. The other cars began pulling away as well. As I looked at the car plates passing by me one by one, even though my feelings were no longer the same as back then, what I was thinking was still the same though.

No, I can't let her go just like that.

I had not passed her the application form to the band yet. Even if she had already decided on going to America, and won't be returning to our school—

Even so, the exhaust was further and further away from me, and all that was left in the end were the faint sounds of the sea waves.

There was no other person at the bus stop. I was left by myself yet again.

And oh, that's not a person behind me, but a demon.

"Well then, Nao. I have plenty of things to talk about with you. You should have more or less expected this, right?"

Miss Maki said that in a terrifyingly kind voice, and lifted me up by my collar with her crazy strength at the same time. All I could do aside from sighing was to sigh even more. And with that, the journey of us running away from home came to an end.

And that means that despite me coming up with all sorts of excuses like wanting to go to the toilet or wanting to buy a drink - even though I tried to come up with all sorts of reason to escape, I still couldn't flee Miss Maki's interrogation.





Chapter 20

The Piano Sonata of Goodbye





The June without Mafuyu is about to be over.

The unique characteristics of my classmates in the Third Class of First Year is that their interests in things typically do not last long. Even so, there were still people who came up to me to ask about things related to Mafuyu (and the incident of how we ran away from home together had already spread throughout the entire school, which made me seriously consider if I should just transfer to another school), and some of them who seemed like they knew nothing about classical music had even borrowed some of Mafuyu's CD from me.

Perhaps that was because the seat next to me was always empty.

But due to my horrible personality, I did not treat the newbies kindly at all, and so I decided to lend them the pieces composed by the Russian composers Scriabin and Prokofiev first. Despite that, the classmates who borrowed the CDs from me still looked really happy.

"This is great! The photo on the cover looks really impressive!"

Go back and listen to the CD!

"There's actually two private guards at Ebisawa's house! Even I was quite surprised by that."

It's break time for our practice on the roof. Kagurazaka-senpai said that to me with a gleeful expression.

"I originally thought there wouldn't be many people at her house since it's huge, so it should've be a piece of cake for me to slip into the premises - but that was just a





naive thought of mine. Luckily for me, she had gone to see the doctor that day."

So Senpai was really the one who secretly slipped that CD with the map into Mafuyu's bag.

"Why did you do that?"

Senpai was cleaning the neck of the guitar which had all its strings removed. She tilted her head and said,

"Plenty of reasons! I thought something might have happened if I did that, yeah? Well, doing that may not have been good for Ebisawa Mafuyu and you. Of course, there was the possibility that nothing would happen as well. However, one doesn't have to gather a huge group of people to start a revolution! If us humans want to accomplish something, we first have to plant the seeds that may not bloom into the land of wilderness."

For a person like me who isn't poetic at all, that sounded like — oh, it felt like something interesting might happen, so I decided to help create an opportunity for that to happen. As such, I was not grateful to her at all.

As for Chiaki, after performing the armlock and camel clutch on me, she followed up with a cobra twist.

"It hurts, it really hurts! Those aren't moves from Judo, right!?"

"I called you so many times, and yet you didn't even message me a reply!"

"I'm sorry! Owwwwwww!" I tapped on Chiaki's arm repeatedly to beg for her





forgiveness, but she had no intention of letting me off.

"So you said you met Ebichiri? Did you tell him that you're my son?"

Tetsurou asked me that rather unhappily while I was preparing dinner in the kitchen.

"He always complains to me. Since he's the one who pays for the international call, I always go on and on deliberately. Keke!"

"I think he probably overheard it when someone asked for my name?"

I'm not quite happy to be the one saying this, but most of the people in the music industry know the name of Hikawa Tetsurou's son, and that probably applies for Ebichiri as well. I've decided to just go with that, because it would be disturbing should he say something like "I know just from your looks alone". But according to Tetsurou, I should take on my mother more, yeah?

"However, it's not quite like my son to be chased back home only after he was taken away for two days! You should have just disappeared like that! Though it is quite inconvenient without anyone to do the housework, I could have seen the face of that stupid-papa Ebichiri close to tears!"

So the worth of my existence is related to something as retarded as that? Then I should just consider running away from home for real next time.....

"Ah, sorry, I'm just joking. I'll be really troubled if Nao's not at home, and I don't even dare to go to the toilet by myself at night....."

"Then just wet your bed instead!"





"Oh right, was there any sort of development between the two of you during the two nights? I'm not asking where you guys went, yeah? Come on, say it..... Tell me the details, since I'm your father....."

I threw an empty can at Tetsurou, and that made him shut up.

June went by just like that.

That practice room was still left untouched as it is, because the owner of the padlock had not returned yet. There won't be any problem for me to pick open the lock, but Kagurazaka-senpai said, "That is a violation of the rules". Since I didn't manage to get her to sign the application form for the club, the ownership of that room does not belong to me yet; moreover, I don't quite have the intention of using that room alone either.

I had no idea why, but the people around me no longer asked me about the things related to Mafuyu, and no one told me where she went either. The only thing I could do is practice on the roof daily to brush up my techniques. I had even learned a few new songs.

It's said that Mafuyu did follow her father to America, though it was a few days later than what was planned. I saw that information from a magazine though, so I had no idea about the trustworthiness of that article.

Did she accept the checkups? Has she decided on going with the operation somewhere?

It's obvious even to me about how much Ebichiri dotes on his daughter. Should he





get tired of Mafuyu's constant running away, he might have even decided to reside in America permanently.

Perhaps I may never get the chance to see Mafuyu ever again.

Ebichiri's performance in Chicago was broadcasted in Japan via satellite - one of the pieces performed in the concert was Rachmaninov's <[Piano Concerto No. 2](#)>. I was holding a slight expectation, but the pianist was obviously someone whom I didn't know. Even if her fingers had already recovered, it's not quite possible for her to stage a comeback that quickly.

I switched off the television, and recalled the Bach which Mafuyu played on that day. Book 1 of <The Well-Tempered Clavier>, Prelude and Fugue No. 1 in C major — the unbelievable power that allowed me to get back my bass might have already disappeared totally without a trace. However, the power of music is indeed great. Come to think of it, all I need to do is place the silver disk into the music player, and press the play button — and Mafuyu will appear before me.

Music is but a bunch of notes and the arrangement or superimposition of them. We humans who are afraid of loneliness are the ones who interpreted them in many different ways.

Mafuyu had only sent a single letter to me. It was on a Sunday right after noon when I received the letter. I was in disbelief for quite a long time when I realized the sender is *Mafuyu Ebisawa*. [TLNote: Written in romanji.]

There was nothing written in the envelope, and instead there was a tape. I took out the dusty tape recorder and pressed the play button. What flowed out from the speakers was the grievous prelude of the Piano Sonata in E \flat major.





Beethoven's <[Piano Sonata No. 26 in E b major](#)>.

That is a piece that Beethoven had written to his best friend whom he was separated from due to war. Moreover, even though it was rare for him to, he named it as—

<The Farewell>. [TLNote: Name of the sonata's actually *Les Adieux*. It's split into three movements. The first, which is linked in the youtube, is named *Das Lebewohl*, which means 'The Farewell'. Wiki link [here](#).]

I passed it to Tetsurou without saying anything. After listening to it, he said,

"The parts of the left and right hand were recorded separately, then merged together. So that means..... her right hand hasn't recovered yet, right?"

"..... Mmm."

However, this is indeed a piano piece played by Mafuyu - I knew just by listening to it. It was probably recorded using the sound recorder which I had helped to repair?

The precious thing which her mother gave her.

"..... But that's quite a horrible piece that she had chosen, yeah? She's saying farewell to you! What a pity..... but I guess there's no helping it. It's your fault for being my son - you have to be prepared not to have a lasting relationship with women!"

"Just shut up, and go back to your work!"

"Right, right....."





Tetsurou grabbed his lunch - a hand-rolled sandwich placed on a plate - and returned to his study room.

I do know that what Tetsurou said was a lie. That piano sonata was indeed written to mourn about the separation, but there's also the pieces after the farewell.

The second movement is titled <The Absence>, while the third is <The Return>.
[TLNote: *Abwesenheit* and *Das Wiedersehen*. Refer to wiki link earlier.]

And so, during a certain lunch break in early July, the back door of our classroom was suddenly flung opened.

"Comrade Aihara, quick, it's about time to leave! Young man, you move quickly as well. Hurry!"

The voice of Kagurazaka-senpai came from behind me. Everyone in class focused their attention on me. Chiaki stopped her hand that was halfway reaching out for my bento - her face was filled with surprise.

I turned my head around, and realized that Kagurazaka-senpai was actually wearing..... everyday clothes in school? She's wearing a white shirt with a black-and-white photo of Jim Morrison printed on it, together with a denim miniskirt..... What the heck is she thinking?

"Senpai, you mean we're going somewhere?"

"To the airport. It's a four-thirty flight, so we will not be able to make it if we don't head there now! Move fast!"





"To the airport..... what for?"

"What else? The prison terms of our fellow comrade is already over, and she is about to come back. It's obviously to stage a rescue operation when she touches down on land!"

Chiaki and I looked at each other for a while, and we understood the meaning behind Senpai's words at the same time.

"Mafuyu..... she's coming back?"

"Yes. But because her father is coming back with her as well, they will probably be visiting those boring geezers related to the College of Music directly after they land. The airport will be our only chance to strike!"

"Huh? Wait, we still have two periods of homeroom later in the afternoon....."

"There's no time to be dilly-dallying!"

"Why do we have to rush?"

"Young man, you do surprise me sometimes. Do you not know the reason? Next week, the student council will be allocating the funds that will be given to the various clubs for the next semester. We won't be able to acquire the funds if we do not raise an application with four club members!"

"Eh.....?" Four members?

"Due to a certain useless person who didn't manage to accomplish his mission before she head to America, this is our last chance."





"W-We're gonna make her do the application form right now?"

Before I could finish that sentence, Chiaki and I were already pushed by the hands of someone - or rather, many people - out of the classroom.

"Go, go!"

"All Retiree does is to talk about the past anyway. You won't miss much even if you skip that!"

"You're not allowed to finish the food that she bought for us!"

So we were actually pushed by the classmates of our class. Please, don't pick times like this to show how united you guys are, alright!?

"We'll help you mark your attendance!"

You'll definitely be caught if you do that in high-school, alright? Just as I was about to retort that, the doors of the classroom had already slammed shut with a *bang*. Damn those people.....

"You guys aren't changing out of that uniform? Oh well, what should I do with you two. Whatever, since the summer uniform doesn't look like a uniform anyway, there shouldn't be a problem if you two remove the tie and bow-tie, yeah?"

"Senpai, please don't decide that by yourself in our place!"

Just as I was about to continue my protest, Chiaki really removed the bow-tie from her neck.

"Then why don't you stay? I have a lot of things to say to Ebisawa, so I must go as





well."

"The plan of the operation which I had drafted can only be done with three people. Young man will be the bait that is in charge of luring the campus guards away."

"No way am I doing that!"

"Just kidding. Let's go!"

Senpai grabbed me by my arm indiscriminately, and dashed away from the classroom.

Oh well, I guess I'll just give up. It should be fine skipping homeroom, right? I'll probably be awarded another slap if Miss Maki comes to know of this.....

As we ran out of the entrance, a shrill cry of a bird suddenly came from high above my head. I lifted my head to look at the skies right above me. I could barely open my eyes due to the rays of the summer sun - all I could see is a black colored bird soaring past the sky.

Of course, that species of bird does not exist in Japan.

..... Or maybe it really does. Just that it is still on the ground dragging its tattered wings, and thinking of a way which it could spread its wings and fly into the sky.

Therefore—

"Nao, faster! Or else you won't be able to catch up with Senpai!"

Chiaki was standing there at the gate of the school and waving her hands hard at me.





I sprinted towards her with huge strides. And once again, it caught up to me - the cry of the bird which had just came from the skies above me; the song that has returned after it had soared past the ends of the skies.

-END-





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